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Set a fox to catch a wolf

The CUT of the WHIP

PETER RABE

Complete & Unabridged



The Cut of the Whip

by
PETER RABE

Chapter I

THE DIFFERENCE between the town of Heering and other small Texas oil towns was that Heering seemed more regimented. Since it was planned, built, and operated by the man whose name the town bore, there were only straight streets, uniform houses, and everything built very close together. Heering looked gray from a distance and it looked gray from close.

Dan Port slowed when he came into the street which went straight through the town and looked for signs. There were no signs except the kind which had to do with the oil fields. Field Three Depot, they said, and an arrow, or Field One, Truck Entrance; but nothing that showed Port how to get out of there. Maybe the town wasn't even on the map, he thought, no more than a factory would be on the map. Port stopped his MG by the curb and got out. He had obviously lost his way.

There were few lights on at this time, except for one gate light over a wire fence and the light in a diner. Port went into the diner.

The counterman looked Port up and down, not because he was something extra large, extra heavy, extra ugly or handsome or something like that, but only because Port was new in the town. Dan Port displayed no peculiarities. He wore a dark suit and had very black hair. His face—the most a description could tell—was quiet.

“Coffee?”

“Black,” said Port.

The counterman had nobody else in the place, so after he brought Port his coffee he stayed close and kept looking. Port sat, waiting for the coffee to cool, and lit himself a cigarette. The match made the only sound in the place. Then he said, “I’m getting self-conscious. You’re staring.”

The counterman smiled and kept looking.

“Why?” Port asked.

“You’re new here.”

It was a good answer, thought Port. None other would have been as true.

“Well,” he said, “have your fill. I’m leaving soon.”

The counterman looked disappointed, and, as if to get the most out of his short opportunity, he started to ask Port any number of questions. Having driven all day Port didn't mind. He said yes, he had been driving all day; no,

he had not meant to come here; yes, this was his first time in Texas; no, he was not in the oil business.

“So what are you here for?”

“I’m going fishing,” Port said. “I was heading for the Gulf, but I think I lost my way.”

“That’s a fact,” said the counterman. “That most certainly is a fact.”

“Can you show me the right highway out of here?”

“There’s but one way out of here,” said the counterman, “and you take that. Take the street this way,” and he pointed. “Five miles or so, and you catch the highway south.”

Port nodded and started to sip his coffee. It was lukewarm by now, which was the way he liked it.

“Getting dark,” said the counterman. “Maybe you ought to stay over.”

Port didn’t think he would like to stay over. The small town was depressing. It did not feel very much like a town to him but more like just houses, put there for no other reason than to be close to the rigs. And that, Port thought, was a hell of a reason for putting up a house.

“Maybe you don’t like our architecture?” said the counterman. He didn’t sound proud or anything like that, but mostly resigned.

“It all looks very efficient. Like a company town.”

“And cheap. You forgot to say cheap.”

“Why are you staying?” Port asked him.

“Because it’s a company town, feller. That means I owe Heering. Everybody owes Heering.”

“The town?”

“The man. His name’s Heering too. Ever hear of Heering?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Ever hear of oil?”

“Sure—”

“Then you’ve heard of Heering,” and the counterman folded his arms.

Port nodded at his coffee and then he said, “You don’t like him,” just to be saying something.

“Don’t like him? Every time I drive by his house I get an ulcer attack,” said the counterman.

“He lives here? Why here?”

“Because his first field is right here, and that way Mr. Heering reminds himself of his humble beginnings.”

“Not a friendly picture,” said Port and got up. He said it to agree with the counterman and to finish the conversation. He was not really interested and wanted to leave.

It was dark outside when Port got into his car and there were lights on in several places; in houses, a few on the street, and on the field which ran parallel to the main street. But most of all there were no people. The middle of a shift, thought Port, but it only explained part of the impression. It did not explain the mean look of the place, the grimness of the sight which showed silent houses and silent machines in the background. It must be because he was getting tired, Port thought, and because of the counterman’s peevish talk. Port drove down the street and when he saw the end of it he speeded up. It would be good to drive in the open again, and old Mr. Heering was probably a very nice man...

As soon as Port was out on the highway the wind was noticeable. It made a noise over the dark plain and pushed at the car. It struck Port as odd that there should be a wind at night. Then he came to the fork in the road. Port didn’t remember the counterman mentioning a fork. The size of the two roads seemed about equal but the one on the right was in better condition. There were no road signs. There was a point to driving back into town and asking which fork to take, but Port didn’t feel like turning back; he turned right, down the better road.

It started to wind and then it climbed, straight towards a black mass which seemed very large. Then the headlights picked it up. Rock. High, solid rock from one side to the other. The road seemed to end at the outcropping until the headlights picked out the gap which had been blasted to let in the road. The passage was short and when it was over the road leveled out, like on the top of a plateau. And suddenly there were trees. Port couldn’t make out what they were, except they were all needle wood, short, thick needle trees which did not seem native.

Port slowed. It wasn’t the right road. Everything looked too well tended and the road wound too much, but before he decided to stop and turn, a big car shot around the next bend and the tires screamed.

It came without lights. The driver would have seen Port’s car by now, the headlights at any rate, but did not seem to care. With a wild lurch the car tried at the last moment not to hit head-on, to try and get past as fast as possible—if possible. Port jumped. His top was down and he didn’t wait any longer, just jumped.

With a loud crash and tearing the MG seemed to fly out from under him and the rush of air from the big car hit Port in the face. But it was harder than air, a terrible jolt that cracked into him without pain, but with great force.

A strange feeling—more surprise than anything else—came over Port. He knew he was on the road and soon he'd start hurting. He lay there and waited. The other driver, a man, was in front of him now. A young, surprised face, an expression that seemed strangely in a hurry—and then the man ran away. Port heard the big car roar and squeal. Then it was gone. Port closed his eyes and passed out.

The coming to was easy and had something classic about it. That was the first thing which crossed Port's mind. The next thing was a pain. His hands hurt, where he had scraped the palms, and the back of his head hurt, where he could feel the bump. Port kept his eyes closed for a while, to get used to himself, and then he opened them slowly. He still saw the same thing. A large room, dark where the glow of the bed lamp didn't reach, a four-poster bed, and he was in it. The walls of the room were paneled, there was heavy furniture on a thick carpet, and the windows were tall. It was night outside and Port could hear the wind.

He sat up and winced. A weight seemed to shift inside his skull, hitting the back of his head. He moved more slowly and got out of bed. There was just the sound of the wind and his own breath coming carefully. Nothing else. It struck him that a hell of a lot had happened since he had left the diner but he hadn't seen a soul since that time. Except for the man with the large car, some foreign make, a Benz, thought Port. There was something gratifying in knowing that it had been a person who had hit him on the road. The thought helped to balance the impressions now, the soundless room, the time spent unconscious—how long had that been?—the impersonal comforts of the clean bed, the small patch on the back of his head—and all of this without any persons involved.

But there would be an explanation. Port walked slowly to the chair where his clothes hung and where his suitcase was standing. Everything was still there, the things in his pockets, all his clothes. There was a long rip in one trouser leg and his shirt had some blood on the collar. Port started to dress from his suitcase. When he came to the tie he started to think what he should do next, besides walk out of the door. Call for somebody? Walk around carpeted corridors in a large house which seemed empty? When he put on his

jacket a phone rang.

It rang very gently, not like any other phone Port had ever heard, and it took him a moment to place the sound. On the third ring he saw it on the bedside table, and when he picked it up he hesitated a second, with something like anticipation. I'm sure, he thought, this will be a human voice.

"Mr. Port?" it said. "Are you awake?"

"Yes. I'd like—"

"May I come in?"

"I wish you would," he said, and then the phone clicked in his ear.

She came into the room only a few minutes later. She was a girl with large waves of black hair and a small face, a very beautiful face, except for the tension Port saw. She wore a house robe which showed how well she was built, in spite of the fact that it reached from her chin to her feet. She closed the door and came towards him quickly.

"I'm so glad you're up, Mr. Port. But you shouldn't be dressed—"

"I shouldn't?"

"I mean, the doctor advised..."

"How long have I been out?"

"Two hours. You had a sedative. Are you dizzy?"

"No. I'm not dizzy," said Port. He would have liked to sit down, because of his aches, but the girl kept standing.

"That's good," she said. "The doctor didn't think the bump was too serious, but if you were dizzy or had trouble seeing..."

"I don't think I cracked my skull," said Port. "Just the bump hurts."

He watched her stand by the bed and Port thought that she looked concerned, but it was a distracted kind of concern, as if she didn't know what to worry about—as if she were not too much disturbed.

"May I use your phone for a moment?" she said.

"Of course. I thought it was yours."

She didn't answer and dialed a two digit number. Then she said, "Father? Mr. Port is up... Fifteen minutes? Very well," and she hung up the phone.

"Everyone here seems to know my name," Port started.

"We looked in your clothes. The driver's license—"

"... but I still don't know yours," he finished.

"I'm Jane Heering," and she started to smile but then dropped it. "I'm sorry I didn't—there's been so much—"

Port smiled at her because she seemed so distraught. "If my accident has

upset you,” he said, “the damage is nothing that can’t be replaced. Rip in the pants, dent in the car maybe, and for the rest,” he touched his head, “you’ve been very attentive.”

But she didn’t return his smile. She just nodded. “It sounds simple,” she said. “It would be nice if something very simple would happen sometime.”

They looked at each other for a moment, but then it went. Jane Heering straightened a fold in the bedclothes and Port turned to look out of the window. There was nothing to see. “Tell me,” he said. “Who hit me?”

She didn’t answer immediately. Then she said, “That was my father before, on the phone. He’d like to see you.”

“*The Heering?*”

She was at the door, holding it open, and then Port followed her down a broad hall. It led to a staircase which curved into a center hall which had the square area of an average house. The floor was stone and the ceiling had a peak. It was a cold looking hall. Then Port saw Heering.

Port’s first impression of the man was formality. Heering was slight and pale, of medium build and medium height. He stood by a tall door and looked up to the stairs. His eyes had very little movement.

Heering and Port shook hands and Jane Heering made the introductions. Not counting the man’s eyes, Port thought, Heering might look like some elderly shipping clerk. Not that it meant anything—J. P. Morgan would have looked right tapping beer in a neighborhood tavern. But counting the eyes, and going back about two hundred years, this Heering looked like a witch burner.

“Thank you, Jane,” said Heering and made a small nod with his head. He kept looking at her until she left. She had not wanted to leave, thought Port.

Heering took Port into an unlit room and for a moment, before the light was turned on, the long frame of the window showed the moon coming up at the end of the plain, the black derrick skeletons silhouetted against the sky. Then the light snapped on and the windows turned blind.

“Sit down, Mr. Port. And you may want some of this.” Heering came back from the liquor cabinet and brought a small glass. “It’s *Schnaps*. Quite bracing.” He gave the drink to Port without any gesture of friendliness or the companionable air that should go with offering a drink. The *Schnaps* was a medicine and that’s how Heering gave it to Port.

The room looked heavy and Victorian, everything showing craftsmanship, quality, and no beauty. There were two large chairs facing

each other and Heering and Port sat down there.

“Did you see who hit you, Mr. Port?”

It seemed very abrupt. It seemed important to Heering to get that part out of the way.

“Did I see? I saw him, but I don’t know who he was.”

“Did you see him well enough to recognize him again?”

“Yes,” said Port. “I’ll recognize him.”

Heering looked down at his hands. He sat like that with his lids lowered over his eyes and, since his eyes were the only alive thing in his face, it now seemed that he was hardly there. His eyes were not closed though. He was looking down at his fingers, rubbing their tips with the thumb.

“Well?” said Port. “You ask as if it makes a difference.”

Heering looked up and said, “It does.” Then he obviously changed the subject. “You will of course be reimbursed in full. Your car, in case you don’t know it yet, is a total wreck.”

Port hadn’t known it. This would delay his leaving, of course, but then it struck him that his leaving was not such a matter of importance at all. To fish in the Gulf? A diversion, a way to kill time because he had nothing else to do. It had been like that for some time now...

“It makes a difference for this reason,” said Heering. “If you had said no, you didn’t see the man’s face, I would have reimbursed you for your damages and then bade you a good night.”

“But?”

“You saw him, well enough to find out who he is.”

“This is important?”

“He’s my son,” said Heering.

Port sat back and waited. Heering had told him very little, but enough to show that something in Heering’s affairs, something very important, might now involve Port.

“I would like to offer you a job, Mr. Port.”

“What?”

“It happens I know who you are.”

Port looked at Heering and then he looked at his empty glass. He got up, went to the liquor cabinet, and poured himself half a pony of the *Schnaps*. Then he came back and sat down.

“You know what, Mr. Heering?”

“You are the Daniel Port who was affiliated with the Stoker organization

up North.”

“There is no more Stoker organization.”

“And I know that you were responsible for its collapse.”

Port shrugged. These polite facts could have been known to anyone who had read the right papers. They were very polite facts, because Heering had not called the Stoker organization by its right name, a syndicate branch, political on the surface, criminal in almost everything else.

“I know,” Heering went on, “that you were Stoker’s right-hand man, that you left because of disagreements, and that in the process you ruined—or exposed may be the proper word—the entire set up.”

“You do know more than the papers,” said Port.

“I have my own investigative organization,” said Heering. “I was particularly impressed,” he went on, “with the unique way in which you have stayed alive.”

“Not working, you mean?”

But Heering was not in a joking mood. “I mean the threat of a sweeping exposure, for which you have arranged in the event of your death.”

“Well,” said Port, and his surprise was genuine. “And do you know the details of that exposure, too?”

“No. I’ve only had a few hours. And besides,” said Heering, “what I know is sufficient.”

“For what, Mr. Heering?”

“To hire you.”

“You want an ex-hood?”

“Not necessarily; but I know for a fact that you functioned more as a businessman. I will tell you that I have only respect for a businessman who can maintain himself on the other side of the law. I want you,” said Heering, “for three reasons. First of all, you are discreet. You could not have maintained yourself as you have, if you were anything else. Second, hiring you saves me from exposing my personal matters to additional people, since you saw my son anyway, and could have learned his identity sooner or later.”

“Not even your own police force would do?”

“They are not a police force, Mr. Port. They are a legitimate, investigative branch of my—”

“All right, let it go,” said Port. He disliked Heering’s righteous manner. “I would like to know,” he said, “what the job is.”

Port was not especially interested in Mr. Heering. He even disliked the

man slightly, but Heering's presentation had been so circumspect that it had piqued Port's curiosity. And there was the girl Jane, who seemed so concerned. And Heering's son, the one who had rammed him; in retrospect the young man appeared to Port as if driven by furies.

"You may or may not know," said Heering, "that I am engaged in some Near East negotiations concerning oil."

"I've read that Pan-Continental Oil is."

"One of my companies. Now, basically, you need no further information on the subject, except for an emphasis on the delicate nature of this kind of business."

"How delicate?"

"As delicate as personal feelings, Mr. Port. So that a delay in a conference, displeasing publicity, any number of little things could throw the balance for or against my enterprises."

Heering had not said very much yet. But Port knew that all this was leading up to something highly important and he should not forget it.

"My negotiations have been completed," said Heering. He looked at his fingertips, as if nothing were quite so important. "However, at this point nothing has been acted upon. And a contract, as you may know, is only as good as the good will behind it."

This time Heering began rubbing his fingertips, the way he had done once before. He did it slowly, too slowly, which was his way of guarding his tension.

"My son has stolen a packet of papers which bear upon my negotiations. He will attempt to pass them into the wrong hands. If this should happen," and Heering looked up, "I would expect grave difficulties."

It was a delicate way of putting things. Port wondered why the man wasn't able to come right out and say, "If those papers get out, I'll be ruined!"

"All this time," said Port, "your son is running."

Heering's answer showed a great deal about the man. "After Robert left the house—which was when he ran into you—I phoned the town police to determine which way he was going."

"Why didn't you ask them to stop him?"

"I thought I explained to you, Mr. Port, that no one is to be involved beyond—"

"I'm sorry. I forgot."

“I learned,” said Heering, “that the Mercedes Benz he is driving took the right turn at the bottom of the plateau. That road leads nowhere except to join the highway to Lamesa. There is nothing in between. Tomorrow I will have you flown to a spot where you can intercept the Benz easily.”

“You talk as if I had taken the job already.”

“You will be paid, of course. The job should not take you more than one day, the way I’m arranging it, for which effort I will pay you one thousand dollars.”

Port hadn’t been thinking about that part of it. He had been thinking about how little Heering had really said. He had spent a great deal of time impressing Port with the secretive, delicate nature of everything, and he himself had arranged it so the job would take no more than a day. All Port knew about Robert Heering, the son, was that he had robbed his old man, smashed into Port’s car while running away from the house, and that he looked frantic. A thousand dollars for one day’s work catching a truant rich boy? Port didn’t believe it.

Port did not know exactly why, but he had already decided to take this thing on. Perhaps because he felt suspicious of Heering, because of the way the girl Jane had acted, the way young Robert had looked...

“One question,” said Port. “Why did your son steal your conference papers?”

The evasion, which was sure to come, would be smooth. But Heering said, “Because my son is unstable.”

When they were through Port went back up to his room and found Jane Heering waiting for him in the hall.

“Father asked you to find him?” she said.

“Yes. Why so worried?”

“I don’t know you at all,” she said, “but I think you’ll find him and bring him back without harm.”

Port wondered what she might be like without the worry and without the regard for her father. He nodded and said, “How sick is your brother?”

“He’s my half-brother,” she said. She didn’t explain more but took up Port’s question. “If you mean is he crazy, he isn’t.”

“Your father said ‘unstable.’”

“I’m sure whatever father has told you is correct.”

“He told me that Robert stole some business papers.”

“That doesn’t make him crazy, does it, Dan?”

She did not seem to have noticed that she had used his first name. It had been the natural thing to say, the more personal thing, when she pleaded.

“I know the papers mean money,” she said, “but I don’t know if that was his reason for stealing them. Robbie is not very responsible. Father says he did it out of spite. I don’t know.”

“Where is his mother?”

“He hasn’t had a mother for a long time,” Jane said, but then they didn’t talk any more because Heering came up into the hall and pointed out that it was late in the evening and that Port’s job would start early. Port touched the girl’s arm and smiled at her.

“Don’t worry. When I come back, afterwards, maybe things will be simpler?”

It was the first time that she smiled back at him and only Heering’s presence spoiled the moment a little.

Chapter II

PORT WAS at Heering's private airport at five in the morning. By seven in the morning the Benz would have gone a maximum of three hundred miles. It would put the car about fifteen miles this side of Heering's Station Ten on his Low Shelf field. The copter would land there as if on business, Port would find a car at the station, and would then drive back toward the Benz, which he should meet somewhere on a stretch called the Red Plateau. In all likelihood Port would meet the Benz and nothing else.

The helicopter took off on schedule, and it was just a little after six A.M. when it landed in the parking area in front of Number Ten station. There was just a pickup and a new station wagon. There wasn't a soul anywhere.

Port and the pilot got out of the copter and went into the pump house. A big Buddah Diesel sat in the middle of it, filling the bare room with a low roar. Still not a soul anywhere.

"The office is this way," and the pilot walked across the cement room and around the big Buddah.

There was less noise in the office, just a vibration. It shook the geranium on the small desk and the coffee pot on the hot plate seemed to be trembling.

"This is the man Heering called about. To pick up his station wagon," said the pilot to the man at the desk.

The man nodded his head and looked Port up and down. "You one of them men from back East?"

"I just came to pick up the car," said Port.

"There's two of them Dallas men out there now, see 'em there by the rigs? Can't make up their minds about that fault we got here. You know about that fault, I guess."

"I just came to—"

"Want some coffee?"

"Sorry," said Port. "I haven't got time."

"Too bad," said the man. "Here's the keys," and he handed them to Port.

Port took them, nodded good-bye, and went out to the station wagon. When he closed the door to the pump house he shut off the drone from the Buddah and the landscape seemed that much more deserted without the raw sound.

Port spun the car out of the parking lot fast and a gray jet of dust shot up from the rear end until the car hit the hard-top. Port turned towards the plateau, racing the car all the way. He gunned the car up the plateau, cursing himself for being ridiculous and cursing himself for the coldblooded job he had taken on—cold-blooded because he couldn't muster enough feeling about it to give him an interest.

He saw he was driving a flat road now, on top of the plateau. The terrain was rocky on both sides and the road started to swing so that Port couldn't see very far. If the Mercedes Benz should show up now and going the same speed... The road suddenly dipped and Port could see miles ahead. The road went down and across the flatlands. And there was the Benz, like a small, shiny bug scooting along the band of road.

Port hit the brakes hard, then reversed so fast that the gears gave a loud clank. The pilot's shenanigans had almost cost him his chance and even now there wasn't the time to pick the best way to handle this thing. Port drove in reverse with his head out of the side window. The motor whined with a high, urgent sound and the rear of the car swung back and forth in sharp jerks when Port started maneuvering through the curve. He hoped that the man in the Benz hadn't seen the maneuver. He hoped that nobody would come from behind and crash into the station wagon. A pile of junk on the highway would stop the Benz, but then what? Port was out of the curve and could see across the plateau. No one from that end... He braked, swung the car towards the ditch, then headed back into the road and stopped broadside. He turned off the motor and sat for a moment. He noticed that he was sweating.

If nobody came from the other end this should work fine. Port got out of the car, left the door open, and walked off the road. He stood there, where the Benz would see him last, and listened for the sound of the car coming up to the plateau. With no one else coming, this whole thing could be over in minutes. Except for the drive back, of course, with young Heering who was a little bit crazy.

Maybe he should have brought a gun, just for the effect... Then he heard the motor.

The Benz didn't look like a bug any more but like a missile. The square grille seemed to rear off the road and the black body seemed the size of a bus.

He's going too fast! He sees the wagon but he isn't stopping—

The Benz was rocking wildly and the brakes screeched but a little too late. What stopped the Benz was the station wagon.

If the crazy bastard has killed himself, or is hurt bad... Port didn't think further and ran to the cars.

The station wagon had one sprung door, a deep dent in the side, and trim bent off the body. The Benz, big and black, showed no damage at all. The man behind the wheel was opening the door and Port could hear him mutter. Port coughed, low in his throat because this was it. Talk to the man. Try it smooth and civilized first.

The man came out of the Benz and Port stopped walking towards him. This was not Robert Heering.

Chapter III

THEY STARED at each other for one dead moment and then the other man made a slight move which broke the tension. "Who in hell are you?" Port yelled at him.

The other man was young and shaggy looking. He didn't understand what Port meant nor was he listening to the words, just the tone of voice Port was using. He yelled right back:

"You got no better place to park that wreck than smack in the middle of the highway?"

"It wasn't a wreck until you came driving, or rather flying, along here! And I asked you a question. Where in hell—"

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" and the young man leaned his back against the station wagon. "Gimme a chance, willya? I'm getting the shakes." And he stood there, breathing deeply, his eyes closed, while the shock of the accident caught up with him.

Port lit two cigarettes and gave the man one of them and in a short while they both stood by the sprung door of the station wagon, looking at the damage.

Port was thinking of something else though.

"I know this car," he said. "Where's the guy that was driving it?"

"I was driving it. He said he was tired. Jeez, I wonder what—" he stopped in the middle of the sentence and in the middle of turning around. The only thing Port was sure of was that it hadn't been the young man who had cracked him on the back of the head. And then he passed out.

The first thing Port saw was the big sky and then he noticed something nice and soft under his head and he didn't want to move at all because he knew how it would feel.

He gritted his teeth and sat up.

"Boy, am I glad to see you up!" said the voice, and then, "Listen, you got an idea where we are?"

Port closed his eyes and said, "Wait up a second, will you—" and he waited for the pain to simmer down in his head.

He was sitting among the rocks, there had been a musette bag under his

head, the highway was empty, and the station wagon neatly pulled up to one side. The young man from the Benz was squatting next to Port, anxious for him to get better.

“He’s gone,” he said, when Port looked at him.

“The bastard,” said Port.

He stood up and knew there was no point rushing it. His head might fall apart. The young man helped Port light a cigarette and then took one for himself.

“Listen,” he said, “will you explain something to me? All I want to know —”

“Later, later.” Port breathed slowly for a moment. “Stop me when I’m wrong. You were hitchhiking, the Benz came—”

“The what?”

“Benz. That’s the car you were driving. The car came along and the driver gave you a lift. Then he got in the back and let you drive. You hit my car, then the guy came and hit me, then you pulled the station wagon out of the way and the Benz took off without you. Right so far?”

“Yes. And he throws my musette bag out when he drives off.”

“Considerate. Now tell me this. What explanation did he give you for all this?”

“Robby? Nothing. He—”

“You know his name?”

“Just Robby. I don’t know the last name.”

Port breathed with relief and even the pain in his head seemed less important now. The whole thing with Robert Heering was still between him and his father and Port. “How long ago did he take off?”

“You’ve been out maybe ten minutes. Listen, I don’t know anything goes on here, but all I want to know where this is. And can you give me a lift outa here?”

Ten minutes only. Port started running to the car.

“Wait a minute—”

“Come on, come on,” Port said. “Jump in if you want a lift.”

The sprung door stayed open but it didn’t slow Port. He raced for the end of the plateau, half hoping he’d see the Benz down below once the road dipped into the flatland. This should have happened earlier, he thought, this little trick of getting slugged from behind. If it had happened to him before he had gone to wait for the Benz on the plateau, there would have been enough

good, red-hot intent inside him to handle young Robert Heering and his Benz and his papers with one hand tied behind. Which was the way Port felt now. He knew the heat would go after a while, but he'd still be after the man, and with a purpose this time.

"Look, Mister, I know how you must feel and all that, but would you just answer me one—"

"We're on a plateau. Red Plateau is the name."

"I'm not from around here, so the name doesn't mean anything to me. What—"

"What you want to know is where you're going? Don't ask me, fellow," and Port kept watching the road.

When the car left the plateau Port could see far ahead. There was no Benz anywhere.

The blank sight of the terrain ahead did it. The pain in the back of his head seemed to turn stiff and the rest of his neck and the muscles along the spine grew tense and painful. It was like urgency riding his back but where his aim ought to be, straight ahead, it was just blank.

Robert Heering was crazy! Why else pick up a hitchhiker while running with a million dollar bundle of paper. Or at least a little bit off, though not enough to stop him from going all out to get his way. Not like Port, who'd been standing alone on the plateau worrying about how to act with the man. But that part was all fixed now.

Except for the problem of old Mr. Heering. When he heard what had happened—though that need never come up.

Port raced past the cut-off that went to Station Ten. There was a fork in the road a little further on and Port took the right one, only because of momentum, and then the road forked again. There were now enough dips in the terrain to give only a short view.

Port stopped the car hard and maneuvered around.

"You want to get out here? I've got to go back."

"Here? Jeez—didn't we pass a pump station before? Maybe somebody there could—"

"Whatever you say," and Port took off, trying to hold the sprung door close to the body.

The office was full of people when they arrived. There was the pilot, the old man at the desk, and three engineers. Dallas men, without doubt. They all wore fatigue caps. "Hey!" said the pilot. "What are you doing back here?"

“I got to use your phone,” said Port. “This is urgent.”

“Go right ahead.”

“If you could clear the room for me,” he said close to the old man’s ear. “This business is confidential.”

“About the fault?” the pump man whispered back. “You don’t want them Dallas men—”

“That’s right. Hurry it, will you?” and then Port watched the old man clear the small room, telling the men that Mr. Heering’s special man had to make a call which was confidential. And they’d better be sure about that fault not being a danger because there were other outfits with maybe other opinions and there better not be anything wrong with their figures.

The door shut and he picked up the phone. When the operator came on he asked for the town of Heering, Heering residence, and to push that call through.

It was now forty-five minutes after the time when Robert Heering had met and then left Port on the plateau.

It was one hour and twenty minutes after the time on the plateau when Port finally reached Heering.

No one but the butler had been at the house when Port called and Mr. Heering had flown to the Galveston office. At the Galveston office nobody had ever heard of Dan Port and Mr. Heering was in a conference. The best private secretary in the Southwest kept Port at arm’s length without hanging up on him and without causing offense.

“... I understand, Mr. Port. I understand it is confidential, but I am merely trying to point out, Mr. Port—”

“Damn it, man, can’t you tell when it’s a matter of urgency?”

“I well understand, Mr. Port, but my position...”

“Just give him my name! The reason I’m calling is ten times more important than any conference he’s in. Just give him my name, for God’s sake, and you’re out of it!”

“Daniel Port, you say?”

“Heaven help me, yes!”

There was one minute’s silence, and then, “This is Heering. You can get off the phone, Burnett.”

The private secretary hung up.

“Mr. Heering,” said Port. “The matter went by me. About one hour ago.”

Another silence, and then, "Where are you?"

"Number Ten station on Low Shelf. I'm—"

"Let me understand this, Port. You are an hour behind?"

"More now. The matter is still safe, still just between us, but I can't follow it up without more information."

To his complete surprise Port heard Heering curse. Not long, not loud, but completely ferocious.

"The road after here forks several times, Mr. Heering, so if you—"

"I know that."

"The copter is still here; however that would mean taking the chance of making the pilot suspicious."

"Out of the question."

There was a long silence while Port let the other man think it over, then, "Mr. Heering. If you have any idea where this matter is going, some contact point, anything like that, then please consider that nothing can be gained from keeping it from me."

"Yes, of course."

"Well?"

Port heard the other man took a long breath. "It's difficult, the involvement—" and then he coughed to make it seem less of a revelation.

"Mr. Port?"

"Yes."

"Please don't write this down." The voice was no longer charged and Heering sounded impersonal. "The matter is going to Lubbock. The address is 912 South Brandywine." There was a pause. And then, smooth and controlled now, "You understand that there must be no contact. You understand that the international nature of all this goes beyond my personal business. If you keep this in mind, Mr. Port, you will not have to be told to keep yourself out of this as much as you can; not to be seen, not to be recognized, not to talk to anyone at that address."

Heering was obviously back in command. He had loosened up and had painfully given Port more information, and was now building the wall again.

"You have a gun, Mr. Port?"

"I can get one."

"Do that."

And the less you know the longer you live was the warning behind that exchange...

“Now, if you will get me the pilot, I’ll arrange for you to be flown to Lubbock. In terms of distance, contact should be tonight, physical contact. And you will have to be there first, to prevent it. There will be a car for you at the airport.”

“I’ll get the pilot now.”

“About the arrangement between you and myself, Mr. Port, we will of course change that.”

“Fine. I’ll see you.”

“There will be a new arrangement,” Heering said and Port got the impression that Heering had said it to himself. Port could see the witch-burning eyes now...

Port got to Lubbock at noon. A Heering employee met the copter to give the pilot a briefcase with papers and to show Port his car. The briefcase was a blind to give the trip importance, while Port had just gone along for the ride. The pilot was instructed to leave right after gassing and the Heering employee had to get back to the office

Heering had picked a good car, a three year old Chevrolet which looked like a hundred other cars in the town.

Port looked at the Chevrolet for a moment, looked up to watch the employee drive off in a company car, put the keys in his pocket, and then folded his arms.

This felt nothing like on the plateau. This felt like the middle of a two-handed job with a start that was over and an end which was clear. Port started to whistle and stood a while longer. Then he started to move.

First he went back into the terminal and asked for a city map at Information. He got one and left.

Then he drove his car into the first gas station, checked the air in his tires to be doing something, and asked for a roadmap of Texas. He didn’t need any gas. He asked for the warehouse district and drove there.

He cruised the streets near the depot until he found what he wanted. He parked in a street with small stores and bars and went into the pawnshop that looked most expensive. He could see five pawnshops from where he was standing, but Port wanted quality.

He picked a Luger because the action was smoothest and the barrel was like new on the inside.

He went to a second hand clothing store, bought a scuffed leather jacket

and a cap with a visor.

Ammunition for the Luger gave him a little bit of trouble and he ended up downtown finding a store that carried nine-mm.

Then he had lunch in a restaurant and while his coffee was cooling he figured things out on the Texas map. Heering had been close in his guess. The Benz couldn't possibly make it to Lubbock till eight or nine; any time between eight and ten was more reasonable.

It was two now and Port drove out of town. After a while he left the main highway and found an arroyo where he shot twenty-eight rounds of his ammunition, at which point the gun felt familiar enough.

He had coffee at a truck stop and looked at the city map. He could have asked anyone in the town how to get to South Brandywine, but he still wouldn't have known where the street was in relation to the rest of the map. He wanted to know how to leave there and get out of town fast.

South Brandywine had a chummy look. The street was all residential and old enough to show some individual touches from one house to the next.

Port left his car on Sumner, the cross street at one end of the block, and walked down South Brandywine looking busy. He walked past number 912, which was on his side of the street, but never stopped until he had turned into Pitt Lane at the other end of the block.

He had seen the stamped-iron sign set into the lawn and the name was Powell. *The Powells* it had said. He had seen the neat flower beds, the raked gravel on the short drive, and the car in the garage. Everything had looked very well kept. There had been no toys in evidence. Nothing but neatness.

It took Port ten minutes to get back to his car without going down Brandywine. He sat in the rear of his car, took off his jacket, his tie, unbuttoned his shirt. He came out again wearing the leather jacket and the visored cap.

The alley was dusty and full of the glare of the sun, looking more like a country lane than the garbage road between two rows of houses. From the back, 912 Brandywine was much harder to spot. It lacked the individual touches that marked the front of the house, and if there hadn't been another sign, *H. Powell* this time, Port might have walked by. He was sweating under the leather jacket and stopped to wipe his face. The backyard was as neat as the front, only less attractive and more utilitarian. Garden tools were stacked in a corner and next to the garbage can was a carton half full with empty beer cans. There were also three empty gallon jugs labeled *Muscatel*, *Very Sweet*.

The screen door in back snapped open and a man came out.

“Howdy,” he said to Port.

The man was older than Port but dressed younger. He wore two-tone shoes, highly pressed slacks, and a polka dot shirt.

“You looking for something?”

“Yes,” said Port. “Could I see you a minute?”

Heering and his secretive warnings be damned. The only way Port could feel ahead in this job was to know everyone in it. He had known much too little, right from the start.

“Who you with?” asked the man, nodding at Port’s cap.

“Are you Mr. Powell?” Port asked. “I’m with utilities,” and pulled out a black notebook and a pencil.

“I’m Powell. Come in, feller, come in,” and he opened the gate for Port.

Powell was friendly enough. He had carefully combed hair with one spectacular wave, but the haircut gave him a shaved look about the ears, the kind of thing they do in the country. Like a rancher who had moved to the city and in no way meant to go back.

“I’m just counting the lines,” said Port. “Maintenance purposes.” He was walking towards the house. “Everything all right here, everything shipshape?”

“No complaints here, none whatsoever.”

Port looked up the side of the house where the three power lines were attached and scribbled something inside his book.

“Man, it’s hot,” said Port and wiped his face. “And as soon as I saw those beer cans there I really started feeling hot. Isn’t that funny?” and he laughed.

“Hell,” and Powell leaned closer, “you want some? I know you’re on the job, but you want some?”

“Well, I don’t want to...”

“No trouble, no trouble. What’s your name?”

“Dan.”

“Mine’s Herbie. Come on in, Dan,” and the two men went through the screen door.

It was cool inside because of a large air conditioner. There were other expensive items. A dishwasher, a washing machine, a dryer next to it, and a garbage disposal unit in the sink. Port heard the sounds of a serial story in the front room and by bending a little he could glimpse the twenty-seven-inch TV set. He couldn’t see the rest of the room.

Powell slammed the refrigerator and punched open two cans of beer.

“Mud in your eye,” he said and gave Port one of the cans.

The beer was a cool pleasure going down his throat and Port felt like closing his eyes and paying attention to nothing else. He put the can down and nodded his head at the kitchen.

“Nice,” he said. “Nice, cool comfort.”

“Like it, huh? You’re looking at over two thousand bucks worth of conveniences right here.”

“I know. I wish I could afford it.”

“Wouldn’t want to do without it,” said Powell. “I can wash clothes, do dishes, cook supper, and grind up the garbage all at one time.”

“I can appreciate that,” said Port. “I’m a bachelor myself.”

“I’m no bachelor,” said Powell. “My wife’s ailing.”

He sipped beer, then put the can down carefully.

“But no matter; if you want something done right you got to do it yourself.”

He had, while talking and between sips of beer, wiped the wet rings made by the cans, hung the can opener on its special hook, and washed the rag and put it to dry on a small rack where three other rags hung side by side without touching each other. It was the best way, the neatest, to let them get dry.

“Well, sir,” said Port, “it’s sure been a pleasure. And I sure wish I could have a fine kitchen like this.”

Powell gave a proud smile and put the two empty cans into a trash box.

“But on my salary, hell—” and Port shrugged. “What do you do for a living, Herbie?”

“Me? I’m retired. I used to be in cotton, way back that is, but no more of that for me,” and he laughed.

“What did you do, strike oil?”

Powell laughed some more and shook his head but never answered.

When Port was at the screen door he stopped suddenly and turned back.

“Herbie, would you mind if I go out the front? I got the other side of the street and going out the front would save me time.”

“Sure, Danny, sure,” and he waved Port into the small hallway. When the two men were next to each other, Powell bent close and said, “Don’t mind if I don’t introduce you to my wife, Dan. When she’s listening to those serial shows there’s no interrupting the old lady,” and then they walked past the living room.

The woman who sat there was an old lady. She seemed close to twenty years older than Powell, sitting there plump and neat in front of the set. When she heard the men she turned to look into the hall and gave Port a friendly smile. She had a friendly pink face, clear blue eyes, and snow-white hair. She seemed to be wearing a housedress, something wrapped around to be loose and comfortable, but then Powell had Port by the door. The only other thing Port had seen was the nicely shaped glass next to her, half-filled with wine.

Chapter IV

AS SOON AS he reached the car Port took off the cap and the leather jacket, threw them into the back seat, and drove off with the vents turned his way so the air blast would cool him. He just drove for a while but then he used the map. He made the rim from South Brandywine to the highway going out of town and clocked himself at twenty minutes.

He stayed in a roadhouse outside of town, drinking lukewarm coffee and watching the sun go down towards the horizon. He had three cups and with the last one he started to whistle, not loud, not melodious, but mostly a beat.

When the sun touched the end of the prairie, Port stopped whistling and left.

As soon as the sun had set the air became cooler, and with the wind springing up Port felt suddenly cold. It was eight, but not dark enough. He stood on Sumner where he could see the length of South Brandywine and by turning a little he could see the parallel alley, the one which passed Powell's house. But it wasn't much good this way. If he were in luck the Benz would enter the street, or the alley, from Sumner, and if it were darker Port would even be able to tell when a car swung in from the other end. But if Robert Heering came on foot, Port would know nothing about it.

The wind, Port noticed, had shifted. It now came straight down Brandywine. It was chilly and had an insistent push, reminding him of the wind on the open prairie. The only thing interrupting the illusion was the cars. One after the other they stopped further down the block until the curb was lined with cars for a long stretch. And the wind carried the voices to Port, snatches of loud talk and forced laughter. Powell's next-door neighbor was having a party.

Port could park where the other cars were, sit in the back seat, and no one would pay any attention. It was too dark now to stay at the corner.

When he parked the car up the block he could see anyone coming down Brandywine, and anyone entering Powell's house from the street. But he could see nothing of the alley.

Port felt the Luger under his belt and pulled his jacket into place. There was only one way to handle this. He left the car and walked the few steps

down the street. This was the sure way to solve his problem—and the fastest.

The door of number 912 opened after the first ring and for a moment Herbert Powell squinted out into the dark without seeing clearly. Port thought that the man looked much older than he remembered him. In the unguarded moment when Powell was thinking of nothing but to see better than his eyes allowed, his face fell into old lines with the effort.

Then he smiled suddenly, and the retired farmer's face showed again, with the self-satisfied folds around the mouth and the skin tight as if from good health.

A chair creaked in the living room and, "Who is it, Herbie?"

"The utility man, Emmy. Remember the one who was here in the daytime? Come in, uh—Dan, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Port and came into the narrow hall. He had his hands in his pockets and smiled apologetically. "I'm really sorry to bust in at a time like this, Mister Powell, and maybe I should have waited 'til morning or called up first anyway..."

"Who is it, Herbie?" and the chair creaked again.

Powell shrugged and took Port by the arm. He pulled him to the arch leading into the living room so that Mrs. Powell could see who it was.

"The utility man, Emmy. See?"

Emmy Powell looked exactly the way Port remembered her, an impression of pink skin and powdery hair and a housedress on her soft body. Her hair, thought Port, must have turned prematurely. She looked like an elder sister to Powell, but not as old as the white hair and the motherly face might suggest. Besides, Powell had said that she was his wife.

"You're not interrupting a thing," said Powell. "We were just watching TV."

"What a beautiful set," and Port put admiration into his voice. "It's clear like a picture." He laughed at the feeble joke and saw that both Powells liked it fine. Emmy Powell laughed with simple amusement and Herbert Powell laughed like an MC.

"Great," he kept saying, shaking his head back and forth. Then he held still and listened. "The water," and rushed towards the kitchen.

"Maybe this young man would like a cup, too?" Mrs. Powell called after him.

"You want some tea, Danny?" Powell yelled from the kitchen.

"Strong and no sugar," said Port. Then he sat like that for a while, with

the television set humming sounds which might have been drama or commercial and with thin party sounds coming through to them now and then from next door.

“If you were about to retire,” Port started, but Mrs. Powell shook her head before he was through and said, “No, no, were just sitting around.”

“Or perhaps you’re expecting company and I shouldn’t take up your time.”

“No,” she said. “We’re not expecting anyone,” and kept smiling at Port.

Herbert Powell came back with three cups of tea on a tray and gave one to his wife, one to Port, and kept the last cup himself. The TV kept garbling in dull tones and the only other sound was the light tinkle of the cups. Outside the windows Port could hear the wind. There was a carafe of white wine by the side of Mrs. Powell’s chair and she poured some of it into her cup. Herbert Powell took three lumps of sugar and stirred his tea.

Port got the eerie feeling that he was in the wrong house. He was spending the blandest, the absolutely nicest of evenings there. The big Luger pinched him under the ribs while Mrs. Powell said, “Ah...” each time she took a sip of her tea. And they all sat sipping while nobody had bothered to ask Port why he was there.

“You’ll have to do something about the corner screen, Herbie,” said Mrs. Powell. “The way that wind shakes that corner screen...”

They all listened to the corner screen rattle in the wind. “Oh yes,” he said over his cup. “I forgot.”

They all sat, almost as if they were waiting. But then, why had Powell let him in, kept him there with an invitation to tea?

Powell put down his cup and then he chuckled.

“Why, Danny, I even forgot to ask you!” He got up and turned off the TV. The sudden quiet in the room made the wind sound stronger outside. “You came in and wanted to tell me something and never got the chance!”

Powell grinned at Port, waiting.

“Why’d you come back, Danny?” he said.

Port had the answer to that one all ready. “You remember,” he said. “I was here with that little black book of mine? The notebook where I take down things on my rounds?”

“You stuck that in your hip pocket when you went out the front door,” said Powell.

It surprised Port that Powell should have observed this. Powell sipped tea

again, not looking at Port.

"I did?" said Port. "You mean I had it when I walked out of here? Maybe I dropped it on your walk."

"No. I would have found it sweeping up."

Port gave a puzzled laugh, looked from one to the other. They were looking back at him and nothing else.

"Well," said Port. "That's why I came around." He shrugged and got up. "Yours was the last house where I used the book and I thought maybe..."

"You said you were going across the street," said Powell. "Didn't you use the book across the street, whatever you were checking there? You ought to have missed it then." Powell made sense. He sat with his cup in his hand, watching Port, waiting to hear the answer.

"That's true," said Port. "Except over there the utility survey was about appliances in the house. How many appliances. I use a different ledger for that, different book." The lie had come easily. Port was aware of this suddenly, now that it was done, and felt the tension catch up with him. Under pressure, he knew, he always lied easily, did things with unthinking ease. Until this moment he had not been aware of the pressure which really existed.

"Oh," Powell was saying, and then he twisted in his seat to look out of the window.

"What time is it?" Port asked. "I went to this restaurant down on Sumner and maybe the book fell out of my pocket when—"

"Eight forty-five," said Emmy Powell.

Powell had turned back to the room and now he said, "It's dark across the way. I figured if they were home you could just run across and see if your book was there. Or maybe they're in bed."

A quarter to nine, thought Port, and young Heering should get here any time now...

"How about you, Emmy," Powell was saying. "Don't you think you should go up now?"

"I slept during the day, Herbie, I don't think I could..."

"You're supposed to get your rest," and then Powell turned towards Port. "She hasn't been well."

"My liver," said Mrs. Powell.

"So maybe you'd better go up now."

"But it's Thursday, Herbie. *Hour of Life* is on at nine."

"That's right," said Powell. "I forgot. She never misses that *Life* thing,"

he told Port.

So Mrs. Powell stayed in her chair, Howard Powell went for more tea, and Port was still standing.

He did not want to leave. He did not know how dangerous any of this might be, what the Powells were doing besides watching TV and drinking their tea, and he had not been able to plan anything for the time when young Heering would come. He knew too little for that and the Powells behaved in an unknown pattern.

Powell came back and brought more tea for himself. He brought none for his wife who was now filling her cup with the wine, and there was none for Port.

“You were saying,” he said to Port, “about that restaurant.”

“Yes. I thought if they’re still open—or I can go there tomorrow, there isn’t that much of a rush.”

It was feeble, but necessary. Port had again lied himself into a position where his staying at the Powells’ house would look suspicious.

“They’re open all night,” said Powell. “But if you’re in a rush about it, why don’t you call up?”

It could mean they didn’t want Port to leave. It could mean that for a long time now nobody had thought Port was a utility man and that he, Port, was deep in the middle of the Heering affair.

“It’s just about nine, now,” Emmy Powell said. “Would you turn the set on, Herbie?”

She smiled and hitched herself around in her chair. She looked warm and comfortable.

Powell went to the set and when he clicked it on he said, “What do you say, Danny, you want to go in the kitchen?”

“The kitchen? I thought perhaps I’d better go...”

“No, no. Let’s you and me go in the kitchen and have a visit. That is, unless you want to watch this here.”

Port said that was real friendly of Powell and he’d rather go into the kitchen than watch the program. Watching the program, Port did not feel he would learn anything. It would be best to sit in the back with Powell and talk, have a visit, the way he had put it.

Powell poured his tea into the sink and looked at Port over his shoulder. Then he winked.

“I figure you and me deserve better than tea. I just never drink in the front

parlor,” and he took a bottle of bourbon out of a cupboard.

They both pulled up stools and sat down by the sink, Port at one end, Powell at the other. Port could see the back door, the arch to the corridor, and the black windows. He could see nothing on the other side of the windows.

“I must tell you,” said Port, “that I really appreciate your hospitality. Here we are, hardly knowing each other, and having a friendly drink. I really appreciate that, Herbie.”

“Glad to hear it, Dan, mighty glad.”

“You do that often, take in strays like you did me?”

“Hell, no,” said Powell. “I’m a suspicious man, way down. You just naturally struck me the right kind of person. I’m a sharp judge of character. I can tell.”

“Tell what, Herbie?”

“I can tell you’re people like me. We work hard, we look out for number one, but we’re nice about it, huh, Danny?”

“Sure, Herbie.”

“Now you’re with the utility people. What do you make, maybe fifty a week, sixty-five?”

“Sixty-five, seventy-eight.”

“Ah. You see, I can tell. With that kind of income, you got a feeling for money. I knew that.”

Port waited. Whatever Powell might say would most likely be a lie—unless by some weird chance Port had gone into the wrong house—but as long as Powell kept talking Port could see more of the man. He saw already that Powell was also sly.

“That’s why I feel free to ask you, Danny, and no hard feelings. Want me to freshen that drink?”

“No thanks. But go ahead.”

“Sure, Danny. Now here’s what I mean. You utility people got different rates. I mean rates for households, for industry, for different equipment. I know that a man who comes around checking wires and looking at appliances is the man that makes recommendations to the men in the office, telling them what kind of establishment he’s been inspecting.”

For all Port knew this might be correct. And for all he knew at this point Powell was a retired farmer who had moved to the city, or an international spy in remarkable disguise, or just a grinning fool building up to a touch.

“Now, what would it be worth to you, Danny, to go back to your office

and tell those people there I'm running all my appliances here in an establishment like a rest home, or a hospital even, seeing I'm taking care of a sick wife all day long, and have them change my rates to a lower category?"

Port picked up his glass and took a slow drink. He had heard right, of course, and Herbert Powell was no mystery in this matter. He probably got a big kick out of the thousand ways a man can scrounge an illegitimate penny: protesting over the right change, skipping out of a hotel, stuffing a grocery bag after it has been weighed—

"Did you ever get your change for a buck from a cashier and then raised a stink you gave her a five and where's the rest of your change?"

Powell stared for a moment and then he started to laugh, sounding surprised.

"Hey—sure I did! You know, that reminds me of that one time—why did you ask?" and he looked puzzled.

Port had just asked him on impulse and having gotten his answer—the one he had expected—he was no longer interested.

"Funny my asking that, isn't it? I was just thinking of something else." Port coughed and put down his glass. "About this rate business, the electrical rates, I think, Herbie, I may be able to do something for you."

"You mean it?" and Powell's face lit up as if he were five years old and had just gotten a new toy. "You think you can? I'll pay you for it, Danny, I'll make it up—"

"No. Forget it. Your friendship, Herbie, is all—" and the rest got lost in mumbles and little laughs as the two men shrugged at each other and made a show of being embarrassed.

"Tell me this, though, Herbie," said Port. "How come a man, successful like you and retired, has to watch his pennies like that?"

"Don't have to, Danny, don't have to at all. Just habit. The same habit that got me where I am." He grinned smugly and saluted with his glass.

But the air in the room had changed and Port knew that Powell didn't want to talk any more. He'd asked his question, had arranged his deal. He was through now.

As if reading Port's mind, Powell said, "Emmy's just about done with her program. That's mostly the time we go to bed in this house..."

Port got up. There was nothing else to do.

"You going to let me know about that rate business, Danny?" and Powell went to the short hallway, then waited there for Port to come through.

Yes, he would let him know.

“Any time,” said Powell. “Come over any time, you hear?”

Any time except after ten P.M. this evening. Port got off his stool and put the glass in the sink. What would the Powells do if he refused to go? And why had they kept him till now in the first place? Because Powell thought Port was a utility man, no question about that.

“You going to drop in on that restaurant, for your book?” Powell was saying, “or do you want to use the phone? Might save you a trip.”

Port left the sink and when he came up to Powell, who was standing there waiting, Port told him, “I’m a little tired myself. I think I’ll check the restaurant tomorrow.”

Powell had nothing to say to that and turned into the small hallway. Port flipped off the light in the kitchen, making a click, and then there was a click from the front room where Emmy Powell had turned off the TV; the silence was sudden.

The bell rang, like a shot.

Port saw the man in front of him as a black silhouette but could tell how Powell stopped, startled, and turned quickly to look at Port. The opposite light from the living room made it hard for Port to see Powell’s expression; then Powell turned, went straight to the front door. There was no sound from the living room and nothing from Powell. Only his steps, going to the door.

Before he got there the bell rang once more.

Port stayed in the dark hall and his hands were up by the belt. He would draw either way, fast.

“Yes?” said Powell, not friendly.

The man from outside stepped into the light so that Port was sure.

Robert Heering.

“Excuse me, does Mrs.—Miss Semmerling live here?”

Chapter V

“DOES WHO?” said Powell and did nothing when Robert Heering came in.

“Miss Semmerling,” Heering said again, and his awkwardness in the delivery looked remarkably genuine.

Port hadn’t had a good look at the young man before. There was some resemblance to his sister Jane, mostly the large eyes, except with Robert the largeness was not beautiful but made him look bewildered. And there was the same kind of intensity which showed in his father’s face, aimless in this case, as if hunted, and without the hardness of the elder Heering. Robert was blond and a little stooped, but that might have been part of the haste he felt at the moment.

“I forgot,” he was saying. “She has a different name now. Are you Mr. Powell?”

“I am. And who would you be, young man?”

But Heering didn’t get to answer.

“Herbert!” came from the living room, and Port, in the dark hall wondered at Emmy Powell’s voice. “Did someone, did someone ask for Semmerling?” and her chair moved heavily when she got up.

It was the first time that Port had seen her stand. She had crossed to the archway that led into the hall and she was standing there, leaning forward. Her pose reminded Port of a fat little chicken, a very curious one.

“Did you say Miss Semmerling?” she asked, looking at Robert.

But at that moment Robert Heering was the one who drew Port’s attention. Powell meant nothing right then, and Powell’s wife meant nothing, except for being a little bit strange, but Robert Heering drew all of Port’s attention.

His face became loose jointed and even though he actually did not move there was a flutteriness about him. Only his big eyes held very still, looking at Emmy Powell.

Port kept in mind what the elder Heering had said, that his son was unbalanced.

The young man reached into his pocket and slowly pulled out a rectangular packet. It was tightly wrapped with brown paper and a white string around that.

“You’re Mrs. Powell, aren’t you?” said Robert Heering. “I don’t think you know...”

He stopped, swiveling his head, because Port had made his move. It was very simple. He stepped out of the dark corridor, and the gun, with one hand around it, was now in the right jacket pocket.

“That’s all,” said Port. “Toss it here and that’s all.”

Emmy Powell cocked her head, frowning, and Herbert looked at Port’s jacket with his mouth hanging open. His whole face seemed to hang, making him look very old.

Robert Heering hadn’t moved except to tighten his hand on the packet. His forehead screwed up in painful wrinkles and his eyes started to blink.

Then he turned fast and ran.

For a moment Port was too startled to move. Then he started to curse and kept cursing all the way down the street, running, while the taillights of the big Benz nodded at him and got smaller. Then the car turned at the corner and then the motor roar disappeared too.

The car had turned on Sumner, which was good. It had turned left, which was even better, because that’s the way Port’s car was facing on Sumner. Port could again see the Benz, tearing off in the distance, but by the time he had slammed his door the Benz was gone.

Port had the car in gear when the motor caught and shot off with a high squeal. The sound seemed to sharpen his anger. Port was boiling inside, not knowing quite why and with no time to think about it.

The longer the Benz stayed in the city the better Port’s chance. The big car was slow on pickup, a handicap as long as there was some traffic, but wouldn’t be easy to beat on an open straightaway. Port went past the first three intersections without letting up on the gas. He had still seen the Benz further on. It had disappeared where Sumner jogged to the right and then cut by two small streets which Port remembered from his trip during the day.

If Robert Heering was leaving town he would do best to take either of the two side streets because both joined the big road out of town; if he didn’t know about that he could go on with Sumner and join the outgoing road by going through downtown. In that case Port could be on the highway, waiting for the Benz, before Heering would be there. But Heering would also take Sumner if he meant to stay in town and double back.

Port took Sumner, hoping there’d be no police cruisers around.

There were stoplights along Sumner now, all the way into downtown, and

after the first one Port saw the Mercedes' taillights ahead. It went bright and then dim, because Heering had stopped for a light. The traffic was much thicker up ahead and Port lost sight of the Benz for a moment, then saw it again. The big car was traveling a straight line, making no effort to pass other cars.

Robert Heering didn't think he was being followed! He had seen Port run after the Benz, but he had never seen Port get into a car of his own. And not knowing that Port was driving, or what Port was driving, some inconspicuous maneuvering should get Port close to Heering without making the man speed up.

For a chase the drive soon became more like dancing a waltz to a loud rock-and-roll beat. The Benz didn't go fast, so Port didn't go fast.

The Benz swung off Sumner, away from the road that went out of town, and Port swung off right behind him.

Apparently he meant to cruise around for a while, an hour, let's say, and then double back.

A few more turns—Port wasn't closing in because he could have done very little; there were bars now, and theaters letting out—and the Benz started slowing towards the curb. The bastard was going to stop, go into the drug store on the other side of the street, make a phone call, have some coffee and kill time. The big car hadn't stopped yet when Port shot ahead and pulled close. He made no effort to stop, but leaned over to the right window so that Heering could see him.

Heering did. Port couldn't tell what went on in his face but the Benz made an unnatural leap, bucked a few times, but made it. The car accelerated with a clumsy nodding of the big body and Port let it go. He stayed close behind.

Robert Heering wasn't clever at this. He headed straight out of town, leaving the lights and the people, pressing the car ahead with no calculation except to get out. Port didn't know whether Heering wasn't smart enough to do any better, or whether he was just frozen at the controls. It came to the same thing. But later it would make a difference, because the man, Port reminded himself, wasn't completely sane.

A short way out on the highway, Port hit the gas hard. It was time. Any more straightaway and the big car could walk away from him. He came up on the left, forcing Heering to jerk away and waste time in getting his car under control. Port sat right next to the Benz now and studied its side. Both cars

were gunning now, and the racket beat hard at Port, making the air excited—when the Benz swung off. It meant a sharp drop in noise, a bare pavement rushing along where the black car used to be, and then Port hit the brakes. He had his head out the window in time to see the Benz careen off the highway. There was a small, rocky road, a wind-stunted tree, and a sharp rise on either side of the road.

Port got the car to stop and turned back deliberately. A strange piece of luck, because Port knew that road. It went into the arroyo where he had tried out his Luger. It went in there and didn't come out again because the arroyo was blind.

Port watched the beams from Heering's lights for awhile, where they danced along the walls of the gulch. He couldn't see the car itself, but it would take Heering at least ten minutes to come back out. Port drove the short way back to the diner, the one where he had stopped during the day, and pulled around in the front so the car headed back in Heering's direction. Then Port went inside. He was not taking much of a chance on losing the man and this might be the only free time he would have between now and getting back to the Heering estate.

Port went to the wall phone inside and dialed long distance. His connection didn't take long and he kept watching the road through the window.

"Heering residence," said the voice.

"This is Dan Port. May I speak to Mr. Heering?"

A few clicks on the line and then Heering.

"Did you meet?" said Heering, as if this was the middle of a long conversation.

"Yes," said Port. "I called to tell you we're coming back."

"You have the material?"

"Yes. Actually—"

"When will you be back?"

"By car? Not before the day after tomorrow. If you can arrange—"

"It will have to be by car. You will remember I want nobody else involved and I remind you of Robert's condition. Take nothing for granted with him, discount whatever he may say, and please be aware of the fact that a certain cleverness, rather surprising at times, is part and parcel of his condition."

"All right. I have to hang up now."

“I’m depending on you completely, Mr. Port.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it,” and then they hung up.

Port left the diner and ran to his car. He tore down the highway with unnecessary speed and wished that something violent would happen. As if the whole job ahead were a vague thing and unknown. But this was ridiculous. Hunting Robert Heering into the end of the arroyo was like shooting an animal caught in a box trap.

For the second time Port knew why he felt wrong. To hunt a loser made him feel sick...

The arroyo wasn’t long, but it wound back and forth, and Port was sure that Heering would have driven almost up to the end before seeing the dead stop. What Port had misjudged was the time it would take for Heering to come back.

He came through the bend in reverse, the taillights bobbing up and down, closer and closer. Port had come into the gulch with his lights off, and the Benz kept coming at him. Port’s headlights snapped on, showing the back of the big car nodding closer, and then the Benz jumped and tore straight towards the hood of Port’s car.

Port clutched and ground the car into reverse before it had come to a stop, and with full pedal squealed backwards, throwing stones and loose sand. The Benz shot by and kept going.

It was now very much the kind of feeling Port had waited for, the sharp anger with a real object and the hard action with an aim that wasn’t too far away.

Part way up the incline leading to the walls of the arroyo, Port stopped. He couldn’t have gone further anyway. He yanked the gearshift into first, wheeled hard, and bounced back on the road after the Benz. The big car was just making a bend, but then it never got quite out of sight. Going forward Port had more speed and more skill, and even if he hadn’t reminded himself that young Heering was crazy, he would still have done the same thing.

He gunned hard and rammed the Benz with his right front wheel and kept pushing.

Then he let up. The other car kept going for a stretch longer but couldn’t steer any more. The rear end dug into the side of the gulch and the car stopped.

Port stopped and got out. Nothing moved for a moment, except the slow dust moving through the beam of the headlights. There was no wind in the

gulch, like on the highway, and the only noise was the long sigh from the cut tire.

And why hadn't Heering moved? Remember, he's off—

The Benz suddenly rocked and the door flew open. Robert Heering squinted into the light, but only a moment, and started to run. It was getting to be a familiar sight, an irritating sight and a useless delay.

"Stop it," said Port. "For chrissake—" But the man kept going.

Port moved to the side of the Benz and looked up at the sky. He could hear the man. Stones falling and sliding sounds.

"Heering—come back here!"

No change in sounds.

Port took up the Luger, aimed for the line where the sky was lighter than the rim of the gulch, and squeezed twice.

He couldn't have hit the man!

But the man screamed and screamed, and the sounds from the steep incline were rushing each other, with the screams getting louder.

He was running. He was screaming and running back. When Port met him, Heering did a difficult thing: he swung at Port's head while running, and made it good enough to burn his knuckles on Port's skull.

Port hit for the midriff with the heel of his hand, let his hand slide on up and jar into the jaw.

Robert Heering kept going forward and fell on his face.

Chapter VI

HE JUST lay there, making no move. Port couldn't tell if the man were hurt or if he were waiting his chance.

"Heering," he said, "get up." And then again, "Come on, fellow—up!"

Port moved with a great deal of caution. He stayed well back and reached out to touch Heering's arm. The touch would do something. It would end the stalemate, it would tell Port something.

He took the arm harder now, feeling how tense it was.

All of Heering was tense. He turned on his back and stared up at Port, as if frozen, and Port saw that there wasn't going to be a fast jump, or a kick, or any attack. Robert Heering was in a stark panic.

Port hunched down on his heels slowly and then took out a cigarette. He lit it and smoked.

"Here," he said and handed it over.

The young man, after a while, shook his head.

Port smoked again, waiting it out. In a while Robert Heering sat up and his hands were trembling now. Port watched, hoping the shakes would run their course and die out.

"Don't be afraid," he said "It's over."

He offered the man a cigarette from his pack and this time Heering took it. Port stayed where he was and let him light it himself.

"Better?"

The young man smoked. There was no need to answer.

Port got up, stretching himself, then flipped his cigarette into the bank of the arroyo. It hit and rolled a short way. Then it lay there and went out.

"All right, Robert. Give me the package."

For a moment a peculiar look came over Heering's face, but then he put down his head and exhaled. The long, breathy sound then became like a cough, or perhaps a laugh, but whatever it was it was all resignation.

"My father sent you?" said Heering.

"Yes."

The young man made the sound again, like a laugh this time. "I didn't think he'd go this far."

"Far?" Port thought a moment, then said, "The shots were my own idea.

He didn't say I should shoot you."

Heering got up. "I didn't mean that." He brushed at himself, doing no good. He wasn't paying attention. "I mean allowing a stranger. He goes far —"

Heering took a deep breath and looked up at the skyline. He did this without interest, as if he were through expecting, or looking.

"Give me the package," said Port.

"Oh, yes," and Heering just handed it over.

It was wrapped and tied, the way Port had first seen it, and there were papers inside.

"Is he paying you much for this job?" Heering asked.

"Compared to the million he's going to make, no."

"What?" said Heering, and he laughed a little.

Port didn't answer. He walked to his car, past the Benz, and kept his eyes out of the beams. He didn't look back because he could hear the young man following him. The footsteps were unhurried, just walking. Port stopped by his car and opened the door.

"We'll take mine," he said.

"Oh?" said Heering. "That's decent of you, but I'll manage. I'll just change this tire."

It wasn't going to be simple, Port saw. This man didn't grasp anything.

And then Heering came closer, so he could see Port and talk without shouting. He said, "Considering, you've been very decent. Really, I mean it."

"Thank you."

"I feel hopeful," he went on, "asking you just this one favor. It's small, considering, and if you say nothing to father, he won't be concerned."

"Robert," said Port, "there's nothing personal between you and me. That's why I'd like all this to be over as quickly as possible, and the less delay the less friction. Uh—so let's go," he finished off.

He had finished off rather suddenly, frowning over what he had said. Robert Heering, with all his removed manner, had drawn something personal out of Port. It's a thing about crazy people, Port thought to himself. He felt confused.

"You didn't let me finish," said Robert Heering.

"Oh?"

"I just want to have one of the photographs. There are four, I think. Just let me have one."

There was no detachment now, but a very serious wish.

Port tossed the packet into the front seat and leaned his arms on the top of the open door.

“Robert,” he said, “I’m sorry. It’s the whole point of my job, you can see that. I can’t even give you a photostat.”

“I said photo,” explained Heering and he too was patient. His growing anxiety would only slow down if he too stayed slow, spoke that way and tried to be reasonable.

“Yes,” said Port, not wanting an argument. “Look at it this way, Robert. Think of me as a machine, built for a special job. You wouldn’t argue with a machine, would you?” Port coughed, then he said, “I’ve been sent to get the conference notes and I’ve got them. And I’ve got to bring them back. I can’t give them to you.”

Robert Heering blinked, licked his lips and seemed to be on the point of saying something. Then a small tic, like a short shake of the head, developed. Port took his arms off the top of the door and stood carefully.

“Are you crazy?” said Robert Heering.

Port ran one hand back and forth over his face so that he wouldn’t have to worry about his expression. He didn’t know what to answer; finally he said, “No.”

“Who are you, anyway?” said Robert Heering.

“My name’s Daniel Port.” He felt somewhat safer.

“Well, you needn’t lie to me, Mr. Port—”

“All right, Robert.” The young man’s agitation was bad now.

“Did my father really send you?”

“Why, of course!”

“My God!” Heering said, and then again, very loud, “My God! Did he tell you *that*?”

Heering had thrown up his arms and then clapped them down again, hitting his sides. He took some fast steps, but not towards Port, walking towards the wall of the arroyo and then back to the car again. “Listen to me,” he shouted at Port. “What did you come after me for?”

“Your father hired me—” Port started patiently but Heering was shouting again.

“What for? To do what?”

“To bring you back, Robert, so that there won’t be any complications for you, and to bring back the conference notes.”

“Conference notes? Oil deal?” Robert Heering’s face was glugged with rage. “Is that what the filthy swine said?”

Port felt his teeth clamped tight. He was losing his patience.

“That filthy swine said conference notes? You know what’s in that packet, you idiot?”

“All right,” said Port and got ready to move.

“*Love letters!* You hear me? They’re love letters in there, from that swine to his *illegitimate wife!*”

Robert Heering went to the bank and sat down there. He put his arms on top of his knees and kept sitting like that. Now and then he ran his hands over his face.

Port watched him a moment. He lit himself a cigarette but did not offer the other man one. Then he sat down in the front seat of his car, facing out of the open door, and smoked. After a while he reached back without turning and found the brown packet there. He held it in his lap and felt it with his fingers. Then he tore it open.

A dozen letters, perhaps, in their envelopes.

They were very old. They were dated back thirty years. They were written by hand, a steep, angular hand, and they all started, *My darling, Darling Emmy*. The envelopes were addressed to Miss E. Semmerling.

Port didn’t read much. Some were stilted and awkward and others showed a free passion. There were musings and plans of how they would live. They were all signed *Carl*.

“What’s your father’s name?” said Port.

“Carl.”

Port folded the letters and wrapped them again. It was a great, deep mess and he wished he had never gotten into it.

Robert Heering got up and walked over. He looked stiff and bent.

“Please, Mr. Port. I ask you this one favor, this one—”

“The picture?”

“Please!”

Port opened the packet again and in one of the letters there were three pictures

“Which one?” and Port held them out.

Robert Heering took one with a young woman sitting on a bench and holding a small child in her lap. He gave back the other two.

Port put them back and wrapped the packet again.

"Tell me, Robert," he said. "If you want."

Robert Heering was putting the picture into a pocket and when he looked up his face showed a gratefulness and a relief which took the old lines away. But then it all stopped very abruptly and the face tensed again, because Heering was listening.

"You understand," Port was saying, "that I'll have to see your father again. If you could tell me more, it would help."

Heering waited, showing his nervousness.

"Why did you steal this?" asked Port. "Why did you want these letters?"

"You know who this is?" and Robert Heering held out the picture. "See this woman? That's the Mrs. Powell you saw, back there in that house. It's her, years ago, when she was Emmy Semmerling and she and my father were in love. Can you imagine that? About my father I mean?" Heering laughed, a frantic and heartless laugh, and then, "And this baby here, see this baby? That's *me!*"

He started to laugh again, but then, at the last moment, changed it into a deep breath and when that was gone he seemed to have lost all interest. Port could hardly hear what he said.

"Do you have any idea, Mr. Port, what it's like being Carl Heering's illegitimate son?"

They had turned off the headlights to save the battery and sat in the dark car in the arroyo. The motor was idling so that the heater would work. The night was very cold outside the car. Port smoked and listened while Robert Heering told the long story.

The elder Heering had met Emmy Semmerling when he was in his twenties. She was the daughter of a pump man and Carl Heering was an engineer. It was the first time he had left the East, his first job in the fields, and Emmy was his first woman. She was soft and simple, and made no demands on him.

He loved the girl with the same sudden intensity with which his new life must have struck him; the raw men, with whom he suddenly felt equal, the gamble of the work, which everyone felt like a tonic, the wildcat fever everywhere. But it went just so far with him and no further. His ordered mind was more inclined to planning, and his temperament to act by plan. His jobs began to change from working in the field to working from the map. Carl

Heering began to know Texas and Oklahoma better underground than on the top, and he saw fortunes, big ones, in oil. Except that he had no ante. That's when his father died.

The death meant fifty thousand dollars clear, paid to Carl Heering—if he stayed single till he was thirty-one. It was a revolting form of discipline, but coming from his father, Carl Heering didn't question it. He had three years to go before he got the money and Emmy Semmerling said yes, she'd wait. And Heering borrowed money on his inheritance, he speculated, he made deals, he worked all day and planned all night. And then he wildcatted. He changed. The wildcat fever was the only thing that still reminded of Carl Heering's brief show of life and intensity.

He and the girl made an arrangement. She had the baby and would wait.

It wasn't a matter of money being more important to Carl Heering than his love for Emmy Semmerling; nothing that simple. It was Carl Heering finding his way of life: hard work, long hours, the peculiar thrill of complicated deals, cold calculations, and the kind of singleminded drive without which nobody gets rich or powerful any more. The qualities he showed were nothing new; rather, he had forgotten them for one brief interlude before his father's death.

Not that he forgot about the girl, or the new baby.

Carl Heering paid the girl regularly, so she and the new baby would get along. And then he struck oil, and he paid all his creditors, and struck more oil, and made more commitments, and struck again, and paid again, and so on till his life, like all big business, was one continuous stream of owing and of paying.

"Except," said Robert Heering, "when it came to business he always made more than he owed. Still does. It's the other way around with the rest of his life."

He didn't say anything for a while and then Port prompted him.

"You mean about your mother?"

"On the surface he paid up, don't worry. He put her on an allowance. It's a lifetime thing and very comfortable. Every month she gets this check from a trust company in New York. And when I was two or so, he took me over. To do right by his obligation—"

"Do you remember that?"

"I don't know if I remember," he said, "I just have nightmares."

And then he started to scream. "Guilt and obligation! All my life I've

been nothing but his guilt and obligation. I've got to suffer it! I've got to listen to it! I ought to do this, I must not do that—" It stopped with an attack of coughing, like a retch. It racked the man, doubled him over, and when he stopped, wheezing for breath, Heering was limp and weak.

Port moved behind the wheel, snapped on the headlights, then put the car in gear. It might help to drive, to change the mood.

Port maneuvered slowly until the car was out of the arroyo and on the highway. Then he drove fast. He opened the vent on his window so that the wind drummed past the slit and he couldn't hear anything else. He'd been driving like that for twenty minutes when Robert Heering said, "I'm not finished. You have to understand the rest."

"All right," said Port. He closed the vent, drove slower. He said, "I understand about your father. I don't think I want to know any more."

"I'd like you to turn back to town," said Heering. "That's part of it."

"All right," said Port.

He U-turned on the wide highway and headed back to Lubbock.

"You got a cigarette?" asked Heering.

Port was out. He said he'd buy some and he'd like a cup of coffee. They found a trucker's restaurant and went inside. It was a change from the arroyo. There was a lot of light, there was steam on the windows, and two truckers were arguing about a brand of fishing tackle.

"Sometimes, like now," said the young Heering, "I think about it and it isn't bad—I mean bad the way it is at home, the destructive kind of bad."

"I don't know what you mean," said Port.

Robert Heering didn't act as if he'd heard. He stared at nothing, slurped his hot coffee without tasting it, and stared. And then Port saw the tense hate come into his face.

"My father makes it that way—what he touches becomes a special kind of bad—filthy with shame. Look," he stared at Port now, never blinking, "I grow up without a mother—all right. Except the swine makes it bad with secretiveness. Is she dead, is she alive, will she come, why don't I have one? Then he got me one, he married. Jane's mother. She was nice, she tried her best—but the swine makes it bad: treat the daughter like a normal child, but watch out for that boy! He's delicate, he's sick, he's got a burden... When I was fourteen my father's second wife ran away, or maybe he sent her away, and I'm sure she gets a monthly check.

"When she left it got worse. She took Jane along—Janey didn't come

back until she was fifteen. She took everything along except the duty-preaching swine, the guilty old man teaching me right from wrong and everything was wrong. It was out now, about my mother, so he switched his method and wouldn't let me forget about it for a moment: she was no good, she came from some lowly stock, with bad bred into her, and that's why I'm the way I am, and on and on—" Robert looked up and said, "Did he tell you I'm nuts?"

"Unbalanced, he said."

"It wasn't hereditary. Is a nervous breakdown hereditary? Listen, there's a building on the place, back of the main house—I used to live there. I used to get the best. A private sanatorium all to myself, handlers all to myself, to play therapeutic games, a doctor on the premises, to give me needles—Christ!"

Heering was bad now. He didn't breathe right, his hands were moving back and forth, hunting for specks or smudges on the table top, touching them and pulling back not to get dirty. But he kept talking.

"And later private tutors there, instead of school. It got so I had nothing to look forward to except the nights. I started sneaking out, sneaking around the place, my place in back, the main house—a feeling like I was invisible. That's what I wanted. I started sneaking all over, prying into drawers, closets, that kind of thing. I lived in the main house now, you understand, but I kept this up as if I were a thief, breaking into someone else's place. Anyway, that's how I found the letters. He had the safe open in his room—he'd gone downstairs with something from the safe—and I got in there. I just read one and I ran out of there. I got sick again, maybe a month. A touch of the flu, a touch of fever, a touch of nightmares. I was dying with disgust, that was the real reason."

Robert looked sick, thinking about it. He swallowed some cold coffee and went on, looking at his hands.

"After a while it changed into something else. I don't care what you think about it, but to me it means something healthy. I had to have those letters. I had to have those letters and find the woman they were written to. She was just a woman—a nice, live woman. And she was my mother. I had to take those letters and look at them and then go find her, just see her once in case it turned out awkward, but go and see her and find out she was no monster, and I'm no monster, but flesh and blood. I don't care what you think about it, to me that's right!"

Port nodded, but Robert didn't see it. He was afraid to raise his head. He

spoke again, and now he sounded stubborn.

"I'm going to see her. I have this notion everything will be different after that. Or at least one thing. She's flesh and blood. Then I will be too."

They stood outside the diner and had nothing else to say. Robert stood hunched over, as if the wind along the building were too much for him.

"You want the Benz?" said Port.

"What?"

"You're going back to Lubbock, aren't you? I thought you might want the car we left back in the gulch."

"Yes. I shouldn't leave it there."

"Can you change a tire?"

"I think so."

He looked miserable. He wished he could say more, but there was nothing else important. He licked his lips, the way Port had seen him do before, and then he thought of something, something to say to rile himself up, to make excitement.

"Do you know my mother isn't even sure that Carl Heering, this Carl Heering in the town of Heering, is the father of her—of me? He did some kind of conniving, some kind of planting of evidence, to make her think that *her* Carl Heering was working on a British dam project in Madagascar. And then he made up a rumor about some Carl Heering who died in the Burma campaign. So if she should have it in mind to make trouble, there would be all this confusion. You get what I mean?"

"Your father is very clever. You want to go now?"

"Of course, I don't think she ever tried anything."

"Robert, I'm leaving. I'm taking back these letters, and I'm leaving you to do yours."

"I'd like the Benz back. If you think it'll run—"

Port drove back to the arroyo and stopped at the mouth.

"I wish you luck," he said.

"Listen, Mr. Port, would you help me with that tire?"

He drove up to the Benz, and by the light from the beams showed Robert Heering how to change the tire. Then he said good-bye and drove back to the highway.

He parked not far away, without his lights, and sat for fifteen minutes. The Benz came out then, stopped, the engine idling. Port didn't drive away

until the big car had slowly turned into the highway and headed towards town.

Chapter VII

PORT DROVE all night. Once, in the early morning, he pulled off into a stretch of sage and slept behind the wheel. What woke him, so he thought, was the silence. The sky was light now, more white than blue, and the night wind had stopped. Without the wind the air seemed dull as lead. He drove again, feeling too much awake, too sharp, with nothing anywhere to look at, with nothing else to do.

By three-thirty in the afternoon he saw the town of Heering; He must have been driving like hell, he thought. This detail he hadn't noticed.

The feeling of being nowhere got worse when he drove up to the plateau where Heering's place stood. He'd never seen it in the light. The strange needle trees were all one mass, not very high, a thin, green color with the vacant sky overhead. This made the main house look very large. It was of dark brick, a sullen red, thousands of bricks.

Port stopped the car in front of the main entrance and got out. There wasn't a soul anywhere. The windless air made him want to shout.

He rang the bell and waited. When the door opened a man in a black silk jacket was there. He looked as silent as the air.

"I'm Dan Port. Is Mr. Heering in?"

"Ah, of course," said the houseman, and looked past Port to the car.

"Robert Heering isn't with me," said Port.

As much as was possible for him, the houseman showed concern. He finally said, "I see," and stepped aside for Port to enter.

"Mister Heering," said the houseman after closing the door, "isn't here. You were expected tomorrow."

"I know. I hurried."

What else could he say? Disgust with the new delay, with the need to sit uselessly waiting, kept Port from saying more. He would have to wait for Heering, to tell him that his, Port's part of the business was over, and try to explain the rest. It would be useless.

"Your room was kept ready for you," said the houseman. "May I take you up?"

"I'll wash up," he said. "After that, I suppose it's all right to take a walk out there?"

“Certainly, Mr. Port.”

Then they went upstairs. He caught himself walking carefully which put him in mind of young Robert, making his pitiful, thieving rounds of the house.

When the houseman left Port at the door to his room, Port remembered to ask something else.

“When is Mr. Heering coming back?”

“Tomorrow. He assumed—”

“Can he be reached? I think he’d like to know...”

“I hardly think so, but you could call his Galveston office. Mr. Heering himself has gone to Anchorage.”

“Alaska?”

“Yes. Though he may be on his way back by now.”

There wasn’t any point in trying.

Port washed and shaved, and changed into one of the shirts that had been put into his dresser. Then he went outside and walked around the house. There was no garden anywhere, just planted pines. Port lit a cigarette, threw it away.

Standing on the veranda he could see the roof of Robert’s old house. It would be morbid going there, thought Port, but nothing worse than how he felt already.

And then he heard the car. He hoped immediately that this would be Heering, so the waiting would be over and he could finish.

The low convertible shot up the drive, dipped hard and stopped.

“Dan!” she called. “How good! Where’s Robbie, Dan?”

For one short moment Port forgot about everything except the girl. For that short moment, when she came around the bend, then waved at him and called, Jane was the opposite of everything Port had gone through in the last twenty-four hours.

She got out of her car, came over. Port would have liked to see her run, anxious perhaps, but happy. She came over with the concern showing in her face, the same distraction Port remembered from the first time, but this time he knew a lot more about it. He also knew how useless her concern was...

“Is—is something wrong, Dan?” She put her hands on his arms and looked up, at his face.

“No,” said Port. “I’m just glad to see you,” and he smiled at her, meaning it.

“I’m glad,” she said. “He’s inside?”

Port took her arm and walked her towards the house.

“No, Jane. It’s a long story. He isn’t here.”

The main door opened and the houseman made a little bow at Jane.

“Will you and Mr. Port have dinner together?”

Neither of them felt like thinking about food, but the houseman stood there, needing an answer.

“Is there some soup? Could I just—”

“Of course, Miss Heering. And Mr. Port?”

“Whatever you have will be fine, thank you,” and then they went into the dining room because they had to eat.

They talked very little during the meal. All Port said was yes, he had seen Robby in Lubbock, and yes, Robby was all right. And all Jane said was that she didn’t understand all of this, but either Port or her father would have to explain things to her later. They could both go to her room, she said, when they were through, because none of the servants came up there unless they were called.

What Jane called her ‘room’ was a small apartment. She had a living room with thin-legged period furniture, a bedroom which was light blue with white trim, and a large bathroom beyond that. After they were in her place, she closed the door and started to talk immediately.

“What went wrong, Dan? Please tell me everything. Father said you and Robby wouldn’t be back ’til tomorrow and—”

“Jane,” he said. “I’m a little puzzled by you. Tell me, do you know your brother well? Are you two close?”

She took a deep breath and leaned forward with her arms on her thighs. It made her full hair fall forward along the sides of her face and Port could not see her.

“It isn’t easy to be close to Robby. Perhaps once or twice, I remember, we started to be warm, really warm with each other, but—” She sat up again and shook back her hair. “He’s secretive, and distant. The truth is,” she said, “half the time I’m concerned about him just because it’s a convention. Brother and sister type convention—”

“You may find it unpleasant to be closer to him,” said Port. “That’s why I won’t tell you anything, unless you ask me again.”

“About Robby?”

“And your father.”

“You sound as if you know this family’s most well-guarded secret.”

“How many people,” he asked her, “know about your father and his first wife?”

“They were never married!”

Her tone showed him her loyalties, and that her version of how Heering had deserted the Semmerling girl must be something tragic; the evil Semmerling girl, the suffering Carl Heering, paying terribly for his once-in-a-lifetime mistake.

“I don’t care if they were married or not,” said Port. “I’m asking about your father’s secretiveness. On one hand he seems willing to fight heaven and earth to keep his secret hidden, and on the other hand I find that both his children know about this.”

She looked very cold and said, “You are being insulting. We are his family.”

“Ah. And Robby?”

“That’s why father suffers even more. Robby must have told you about this, didn’t he? He finally did let it out.”

“Yes.”

“You are,” said Jane Heering, “the first outsider who ever knew.”

“And heaven help me once your father finds out, is that it?”

He was sorry he had put it that way, even though it had been Jane Heering’s meaning. It created an awkward and hostile air between them now, the opposite of everything Port might have wished for with Jane.

“And your mother? She and your father didn’t part friends. Doesn’t your father worry...”

“You are going too far,” said the girl. “My mother is not vindictive. When a person has breeding—”

“All right. I’m sorry. And Emmy Semmerling? He isn’t worried about her?”

“She is a drunk,” said Jane. “She is somewhere in California, I think, and by the description I—”

“You don’t know her?”

“Certainly not.”

The old Heering had surrounded his guilt, and his secret, with three powerful safeguards. He was safe behind three of the stiffest conditions: good breeding, blind belief, and stupidity. The chink had been Robert Heering, and then he had pushed him too far.

A lot would collapse for the old Heering.

“You asked me where your brother was and whether something is wrong. Robert is with his mother, and as for the second, a hell of a lot is wrong.”

And then he told Jane Heering everything he had seen and how he himself felt about it, and he watched how the girl, at a cruel pace, changed through a spectrum of strong emotions. She was hostile, angry, then stubborn, then weak; she showed fear and disgust; she became anxious with her confusion. She opened up, after a while, to the whole impact of Port’s story, and when he was done she closed her eyes and her only movement was breathing.

The light was all gone now. Port killed his cigarette and looked at the low table for a moment. He stood up, rubbed his face, and wished he were walking somewhere in the open, and whistling maybe.

“Please,” said Jane, “Don’t put the light on—not yet.”

Port hadn’t known that he had been about to turn on the light. He pulled his hand back and turned to see Jane. Her voice had been different from any other time, without any intentional meaning, without trying for anything; as if she were through.

Port sat down next to her and put his arm on her shoulder. He held her face with the other hand and made her rest against him. It was too dark to see her, but he felt how she leaned close to him and drew together, as if for warmth.

They sat for a while and he stroked her arm.

“It’s bad,” he said, “isn’t it?”

“I’m confused. Everything is so much more confused, so terribly complicated—” and then, by her movement, Port knew she had started to cry.

In his way, Port felt as badly as she, but no longer about the filth in the Heering affair and not about anyone except Jane. He wished they could have been this close for other reasons, for sheer joy of closeness and not fear of being alone and confused.

They held each other close with the warmth and the need growing in them, and then reasons didn’t matter at all.

“Dan,” she said, “I want something simple to happen. I just want something to be very simple...”

He took her through the dark room and into the dark bedroom. They undressed each other, staying close, neither wanting to lose the touch of the other.

Chapter VIII

AFTER BREAKFAST the next morning, the houseman told Port about Heering. The Galveston office had called to say Mr. Heering was due back in the afternoon; that Mr. Heering—still airborne and on his way back from Alaska—had radioed the Galveston office for this information: is Mr. Heering's son, Robert, back at the house?

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them," said the houseman, "that Robert Heering was not here." Then he added, "I believe that was the extent of my duty," and left for the kitchen.

The houseman, thought Port, felt it too: the tension growing and the unfinishedness...

Four hours later, Jane was upstairs in her room, napping, and Port was sitting in the empty front hall. Outside something changed. The wind noise dropped away and did not come back. It was as if a vacuum was left. This held for a short while and Port sat there, pulling on his cigarette, listening, straining into the silence, when the big door opened and Carl Heering came in.

The older man, Port thought, moved like a cat. It had not struck Port before. And another thing Heering did, he said "Good afternoon," nodded, and at the last moment he smiled.

It was gone very quickly and Heering had passed to walk towards a door.

"Will you come with me, please?" and he held the door open.

Port walked in and Heering followed. Port thought he must have been mistaken about the smile. Carl Heering does not smile. He has a nondescript face, a mouth as impersonal as a line drawn with a ruler, and the only thing about Heering's face are his eyes.

But Heering was going across the room with his eyes downcast, it must be, because they showed nothing. He sat down at his desk, looked up at Port, and his eyes still showed nothing.

He put his briefcase on top of the desk, pulled out a folder, a letter, more folders, and then he left everything there.

“Now then, Mr. Port,” he said and waited.

Port stood up and handed the brown packet across.

Heering took it and laid it on the couch next to him.

“It’s been opened, Mr. Port.”

Port kept standing. He put his hands in his pockets and looked straight into Heering’s face, so that Heering had no doubt about the way Port felt.

“I’ll make it short,” he said. “I did only half the job. I brought your package back but not Robert. That makes your bill half, five hundred bucks, which I’ll take in cash. Or your check will do. Then I’m out of it.”

“Not so quick, Mr. Port,” said Heering. “I would at least like to hear why you failed with Robert. Where is he?”

The behavior was puzzling. Heering was much too conversational—unless the control the man had over his emotions was really fantastic. Port said, “Robert is with his mother.”

Port did not expect any great change in Heering’s behavior, and he was right. Heering gave no response, except to raise his eyebrows a little. So Port said,

“I believe you know, or suspect, that Robert told me what was in that package.”

“I know it,” said Heering. “I saw that the package had been opened.”

“It changes only one thing,” said Port. “Instead of conference notes I returned your letters. I see no point in more talk.”

“But you forget about Robert,” said Heering and the venom crept back into his voice. “And I assigned you to bring him back.”

“That’s out. We don’t have to discuss it.”

“But we do, Mister Port. I’m saying it for the third time: Your assignment was to return Robert and—”

“Once more,” said Port. “And so you understand what you’re up against. I believe Robert. I’ve seen the wreck you’ve made out of him with your poison. I’ve heard about the house in the back, that sick-maze you built, and it—with you—reeks of intentional murder. I’ve known a man who killed in cold blood. He’s dead now himself. He killed in cold blood and all alone. You, Heering, you’re worse! You don’t do your killing alone but make somebody else do it. You make the victim do it!”

“I’ll see to it, Mister Port—”

“The hell you will,” said Port and walked to the door. The sheer impact of the high voice stopped him and he turned around, looking at Heering. The

man was livid now.

“I will force you! I want Robert, and you are the—”

“How?” said Port, and he felt so removed by now he could almost laugh.

But when he turned to the door again he still caught a glance of Heering. A white rage was trembling all over Heering’s face and his voice was close to a shriek.

“Here!” and he held up a letter, as if ready to strike. “Here’s how! *My son has been kidnaped!*”

It was typewritten and started, “*Dear Mister Heering, Sir.*” All through the letter backwoods phrases kept showing up, the way sugar is used to cover a poisonous taste.

Your son Robert is here now and feeling all right now.

I figure that’s only natural and his mother does too. I’m proud to know the boy and we’re in this little old place here, just resting up where nothing can harm the boy or be of bother, because he deserves the best. We all think so and our Mister Port too who helped the boy out when he was so wore out and near loco from fretting himself over what was the right thing to do. Well we got him all safe now and not to worry. I’ll let you know more by and by. I know you’ll want to hear, being his father, and being so well set up you will want only the best for Robert.

It was signed, *Herbert Powell.*

There was no return address and the letter had no stamp on it.

“Well?” said Heering.

Port put the letter back on the desk and nodded.

“I think you’re right. And the next letter will be the touch. The first touch.”

“I thought you might know how it goes,” said Heering. He was going to start all over, thought Port. The man didn’t give up. As a matter of efficiency, and to keep his secret confined, he had decided that Port would handle this thing, until Robert was back and Heering took over himself.

Port didn’t look at Heering. He knew how the other one felt, how his eyes sat in his face and what the expression would mean. And at the other end of the scale were Port’s feelings about Robert Heering. His first free swing out of the black rut where he had been kept most of his life, and the swing snapped back in his face.

“I’m not part of it,” said Port. He almost sounded tired.

“I didn’t mean that you were part of the kidnaping,” said Heering. “I was referring to your criminal background, that it doubtlessly gives you some familiarity with this sort of thing.”

“You’re only half right. I wasn’t in on this, and I’m—”

“Of course not,” and then, for the second time, Heering smiled, very briefly. “I know you quite well by now. You are not too easily predictable by the usual standards, but your impulses, I notice, are quite consistent.”

There was no point standing any longer, nor was it wise to leave now. Heering, Port felt sure, was building up to something that mattered. Port sat down and said,

“You mean, with my clean-cut impulses and with your clean-cut instructions, I’m now going forth and rescue the lost Robert?”

“You mean, no?”

“No.”

“Well, then—”

“Discounting pity, which never goes very deep, Robert means nothing to me.”

“You’re right,” said Heering, and for a moment he could not keep the high look out of his face, smug and well-satisfied for having understood this much about Port, and for being prepared. The last thought gave him the most satisfaction.

“You will do what you can, Mr. Port, because I have this.” He held the letter up and then, from that height, let it drop to the desk. The letter fell down with a smack.

“You are one of the kidnapers, Mr. Port.”

Port put his hands back in his pockets, and very slightly he started to rock on his feet.

“That, Mr. Port, is how it will look. Your name mentioned affectionately in this letter. Your presence here, to negotiate. The amount of money—considerably larger than five hundred dollars—which I am transferring to your account. The car outside, which you used to chase Robert.” Heering sat down behind the desk and looked at his hands. “You didn’t know that my Benz was picked up in Lubbock, parked illegally somewhere? My office was called by the police about that. One fender is dented. And the car you drove shows the paint. You must have chased the boy hard. And then the story of some young man, a hitchhiker who works at one of my pumping stations—” Heering looked up, shook his head, “He’s not working at Low Shelf any

more. I can imagine what you might do to one of my witnesses. And then,” Heering went on, “the entire complexion of your movements after your arrival here. My employees—the copter pilot, pump station supervisor, Lubbock office, my Galveston secretary—all instructed to aid your progress but no reasons given. You can see how that can be cast—”

“I don’t doubt you can do it,” said Port. Then he put his hands on the desk and leaned slightly.

“And then,” he said, “when I get on the stand, Mr. Heering, how long do you think your secrets will stay secrets? How long do you think it will take me to undo your twenty-five years of hard effort?”

Carl Heering was a narrow man, built smallish, and most of the time nothing changed that impression. He stood up now, standing less high than Port, but none of that mattered. A fantastic strength moved into him, or moved to the surface of the small man so that it showed everywhere. This reservoir of strength made him so sure, it made effort unnecessary. His voice was low and quiet.

“That way,” he said, “you could wreck me. And in that wreck I’ll tear down everything in my reach. I’ll wreck you, my children, anyone who gets within reach. Believe that, Port. I don’t win, no one else will either.”

Port moved away from the desk, went to the window, and stood there for awhile, looking out. He couldn’t see very far because of the light, but heard the wind again. It was starting again with a whisper.

“All right.” He turned around and looked at Heering. “I’ll get Robert,” he said.

Heering had been sure of it. He did not have to relax, or feel relief when he heard Port give his answer, because he had been sure. He had known that his strength was greater than any.

But he did not know why Port agreed—what made the switch possible; that every move Port made, from now on, would be a move *against* Heering.

Chapter IX

BOTH MEN were finished with their decisions and the rest was cold details. It was business now and a concrete job. The two men, on this level, worked well together.

Port sat down on the couch again and asked if he could have a cup of coffee. Heering rang for the coffee and asked for two cups. Until the houseman came back with the tray Heering did things with papers on the top of his desk and Port sat on the couch, arms folded. He had his eyes closed part of the time and every so often he made his monotonous whistle sound.

The houseman poured Heering's cup half and half with a lot of sugar. Port asked for his black. When Heering came over to sit opposite, Port started asking.

"How did you get that letter from Powell, since it didn't come through the mail?"

"It was in my Galveston mail. Delivery by the mailman is made on the ground floor, into a mail bin. The slot to the bin is accessible from the Information office—somewhat like a mailbox."

"I could walk in there and drop a letter?"

"Yes. It happens rarely, but sometimes outgoing mail is dropped there by mistake. Even though the slot is clearly marked."

"Are you sure this is from Herbert Powell?"

"There is no question."

"You know his handwriting?"

"By sight."

"I don't understand why?"

"This—this Mrs. Emma Powell," said Heering, "receives a monthly check. From a New York—"

"I know about the check you send her. Quit being so secretive, dammit."

Heering said, "Some of those checks have been endorsed by Herbert Powell. The signature on the letter is the same."

"Any idea when that letter was dropped?"

"Today."

"Today when?"

"After three P.M. At that time the three o'clock deliveries had been cleared

out and this single letter came through. The clerk forwarded it to my office immediately.”

“Last night, at about ten o’clock, Powell was in his home in Lubbock. Your son Robert couldn’t have identified himself there until about twelve, or even later. He left me, to go to the Brandywine address, after eleven. And today, less than twenty-four hours afterwards, you get this letter. How far is Lubbock from Galveston?”

“About five hundred miles.”

“I don’t know the roads down there. Can a man drive that distance in fifteen hours?”

“No, I gave you air miles. By highway the distance is quite a bit more. Both Abilene and Austin constitute major swings of direction on the main highway. And secondary roads are no saving in the central part of the state.”

“And Powell had probably less than fifteen hours...” said Port. He thought a moment, then said, “And airmail is out.”

“Naturally it’s out. I told you—”

“What you told me doesn’t stop Powell from sending a letter to a friend in Galveston and having it dropped at your building in a plain envelope. Anyway, there wasn’t time. Even if the letter got there the same day, it wouldn’t be delivered ’til the following. Which would be tomorrow.”

“Robert is in Galveston!” Heering said suddenly.

Port shrugged. “He’s with Powell and Powell flew there from Lubbock and dropped the letter?”

“Of course! I fly from Lubbock to Galveston in less than two hours. I don’t know what commercial planes do on that run, but—”

“It makes sense,” said Port, but he didn’t move. He kept sitting still, fingering the rim of his cup.

“A short while ago,” said Heering, and there was an edge to his voice, “you were in a great hurry to—”

“The more I can figure out sitting here, the faster can I move once I leave,” said Port. And then, “Do you know of a detective agency which—”

“The chief reason, Mr. Port, why you are working for me—”

“I know, I know,” and then Port took a deep breath. “Look. I want some leg work done. You can disguise the assignment all you want without cutting in on some efficient leg work which an agency can do better than I.”

“I first want to hear what you want. As far as investigations are concerned, I have my own organization, as a part of my enterprises.”

“Yes,” said Port. “I’m sure.” Then he lit a cigarette. He started to talk while the smoke was still in his lungs. “I want to know if Powell left Lubbock, and if so when. Any clue where he, or he and Robert, might have gone, and if Mrs. Powell is still at her address on Brandywine. By the way,” said Port, “do you know where that Benz was found?”

“I don’t know. I can find out.”

“Yes. And I’d like a little background on Powell. There may not be time for much, but something about what he does, whom he knows currently.”

“I can help you with that myself,” said Heering, and for the fifth or sixth time Port realized that Heering usually knew a great deal about anyone even slightly involved with him.

“Can you reach your private police now and give—”

“They are not a private police, Mr. Port. As a legitimate branch of any enterprise as large as mine, an investigative branch is both necessary and ethical.”

“Can you call them now and ask them for a fast job on this?”

Heering got up and went to his desk. He sat down behind it and asked Port to repeat what he wanted and wrote it down on a pad. Then he picked up the telephone, and in a short while: “This is Mr. Heering,” he said. “Connect me with Ebberhouse. If he isn’t in the building, try his Houston office. If he isn’t there, ring his home, a Galveston number.”

Ebberhouse was ‘in the building,’ which Port guessed was the Heering office in Galveston, and got his instructions. In the end Heering asked, “How long?” Then he nodded and hung up the phone.

“Some of it will be phoned in as early as this evening, late this evening,” said Heering. “The rest, with any luck, will be available tomorrow forenoon.” Heering came around his desk, soothed down his jacket. “It is dinnertime. Will you join me and my daughter or would you prefer to eat in your room?”

“I’d like to hear about Powell,” said Port. “You said you had information on him.”

Heering looked at the watch he had in his vest, then sat down opposite Port.

“We eat at eight,” said Heering. “In fifteen minutes. What I know won’t take any longer. Would you like the coffee heated?”

“No. This is fine.” Port put his cup down, put his arms on his knees. “I’d like to know how much money Powell has.”

“Money?” said Heering. “He has none.”

“None?”

“Why the question?”

“I was wondering why a man, retired in his forties, pulls a kidnaping stunt.”

“He isn’t ‘retired,’ in the approved sense of the word. He is living on his wife’s stipend. I mentioned to you that a New York bank sends her—”

“Yes. You told me. Now, something else. Where did he live before he came to Lubbock? He mentioned he was a cotton farmer in the past.”

“Before he married the Semmerling woman,” said Heering, and Port had to marvel at the anonymous way in which Heering spoke of her, “he lived in various places; Fort Worth, Houston, Galveston, New Orleans, and in Laredo and Brownsville, on the border. Those are the main places. He was brought up in Dry Waters, a small place near the New Mexico border. In the panhandle that is.”

“They raise cotton there?”

“Certainly not. Nothing grows there. The town only exists because it used to be on the trail—one of the trails—into former Mexican territory.”

“Then why did he say—”

“Yes, about the cotton. The only contacts he’s had with cotton are some shady warehouse deals in which he’s been involved. They had to do with buying, hoarding, selling, with undercutting legitimate concerns in the buying transactions from farmers.”

“Powell did this?” Port was surprised. “Doesn’t that take a great deal of money, buying on speculation?”

“It wasn’t large scale. What money it did take came from someone else. Powell was just one of the underlings.”

“Who else?”

“Some local person, Joseph Flynn. He’s been involved in some border manipulations, dollar-peso transactions, wetback running, some minor black marketing during and after the war—”

“Local where?”

“I meant Galveston. I don’t know exactly how Powell got involved with him, though that wouldn’t be difficult. Any drifter around the Galveston docks usually runs one or two errands for that Flynn person at one time or another. All this, by the way, predates Powell’s marriage which occurred over eight years ago.”

Powell made much more sense now. A thin kid in the windy plains

country of northern Texas, shy of work, sick of the home town with one beer parlor and movies on Saturday, he runs to the big cities and starts hunting, like a scavenging dog. He starts with the filthy jobs that take no training or pull, but he's hungry, always hungry for the big buck that comes for nothing. He finds company with that way of thinking. He worms himself into the dead-end orbit of some local operator, running errands, taking his gaff, living on promises.

But the biggest deal, the easiest buck, comes from somewhere else and has nothing to do with the one thousand small plans Powell must have been making over those years. Unexpected! Like in the movies, and the way this sort of thing ought to be. He marries a woman with a permanent income, rich even, a simple woman with no mind of her own. She likes to drink wine and watch television. Or maybe Powell started her on the habits...

End of the hassle, easy street. Except that kind of end never takes care of the inside greed. Powell feels big, as if all this was earned in some grand, special way, earned through his special qualifications, except he has never proven it. He sits in his automatic kitchen and knows what a hot operator he really is, but how to really prove it...

And so the Heering bonanza.

There was a knock on the door and the houseman came in. "Yes," said Heering, "I'm ready. Mr. Port?"

"I'll eat in my room, if you don't mind."

"Two places," said Heering to the houseman.

"Miss Heering," said the houseman, "asked to be excused. She isn't feeling—"

"One place," said Heering, and walked out of the door.

The first phone call from Ebberhouse came at ten-thirty that night. Heering took the call at his desk while Port sat in the next room reading maps of the state and of some of the big cities. Heering called Port to his desk and gave him the phone.

"Port?" said Ebberhouse. A deep voice, but mostly anonymous.

"Yes, Mr. Ebberhouse."

"Mr. Heering says to report directly to you—"

"I'm listening."

"The employee—"

"What did you say?"

"I'm talking about this Herbert Powell. The employee Mr. Heering talked about."

"Yes. Please go ahead."

"He left the Brandywine address at about eight this morning. This came from a neighbor. And he was carrying a bowling ball bag."

"With a ball in it?"

"Seems not, and the next information bears that out. Checking all public transportation we find he bought a ticket—"

"One ticket?"

"One, yes. One ticket on a northbound Greyhound leaving Lubbock at ten-five A.M. That's according to the ticket man's seating chart, which ought to be verified by the driver's chart and maybe his personal report. We haven't got a hold of him yet. He's still on the road."

"Going where?"

"The driver?"

"No. The employee."

"Ticket was made out to Fort Gander, changing at Amarillo. Now that in itself, Mr. Port, doesn't mean—"

"Where's Fort Gander?"

"Western panhandle. Last town of any size in that direction. In Texas, that is. Now, we weren't instructed to check destination, Mr. Port, but if you want me to—"

"Just tell me this. Do you know a town by the name of Dry Waters?"

"You say Dry Waters?"

"Do you have a large detailed map there? If it's just a road map I don't think it'll do."

"Just a minute..."

Port heard the turning of pages and then the phone being put down on the desk. Ebberhouse seemed to be walking across the room. His footsteps came back and he said.

"I found it on the wall map we have. Just a burg, you know. Couldn't have found it without the index."

"Where, Mr. Ebberhouse?"

"About sixty or so miles from Fort Gander."

"Thank you. Now, if you'll—"

"Would you hold it a minute, Mr. Port? The other phone—" and Ebberhouse was inaudible again.

“Mr. Port?”

“Here.”

“That was the report from my man covering the bus driver angle. The bus driver says he checked off Powell at Amarillo.”

“Anybody else?”

“Eight other passengers.”

“All from Lubbock?”

“Just a minute... Three from Lubbock. You want their names?”

“Give me their names.”

When Port said this he glanced up to see Heering. The man was now holding one lip in his teeth and his hands were very still on the edge of the desk. Heering, Port saw, was sweating blood. He had followed the conversation well enough to know that passenger names were going to be mentioned.

“Mrs. J. Gomez, Mr. Herrick Ross, Mr. Saul Rostoff.”

“Which one,” Port asked, “sat next to Powell?”

“Ross did, by the chart. Now that doesn’t mean—”

“Hold it a minute, Mr. Ebberhouse?” and Port looked at Heering. “Whom does Robert know by the name of Ross? Anyone?”

“First one that comes to my mind,” said Heering, “is a Dr. Jacob Ross. For a certain time he was my son’s attending physician.”

Port nodded and then he said, “Robert was with Powell on that bus. They both left at Amarillo.”

“How do you—”

“He gave a false name, so don’t worry. He picked Herrick Ross, his own initials reversed. Many people will do that. He picked the last name for familiarity.”

“He did not like Dr. Ross.”

“That’s all right,” said Port and turned back to the phone. “What else, Ebberhouse?”

“Mr. Heering asked about his Mercedes Benz, where it had been found. That was, according to the police, half a block from the Lubbock Greyhound station.”

“Fine. Do you know where Mrs. Powell is?”

“At home. According to my man, Mrs. Powell was reluctant to answer the bell. He could see her through the window.”

“Why? Reluctant, I mean.”

“She was watching television.”

“All right. Did you find out anything else, something about Powell’s associations in Lubbock, friends, that sort of thing?”

“Not much, Mr. Port. Bowling club, poker friends in the neighborhood—maybe something will turn up by morning. I don’t think I can promise much more before then.”

“You’ve done fine, Mr. Ebberhouse.”

“I hope to be able to have some kind of rundown for you in the morning. Sometimes phone records tell a lot when it comes to leads, but we got our instructions a little late to do much before morning.”

“You have access to telephone company records?”

“Why of course, Mr. Port.”

“One more thing. When did that bus get to Amarillo?”

“On schedule. Five in the afternoon. It wasn’t a direct bus. Had a lot of local stops.”

And that was about the end of their conversation. It meant to Port that Robert and Powell were heading into the vicinity of Powell’s home town, not an uncommon decision when a man suddenly wants to hide. It also showed that Powell wasn’t very experienced with this sort of thing. And it meant that Powell’s letter to Heering had been dropped at the Galveston office building by someone unknown. Powell, it seemed, was willing to take the risk of letting someone else in on the caper. Or maybe he didn’t feel big enough to pull it alone.

“There’s one more thing I’d like to do tonight,” Port said to Heering. “I need some bus information from the Lubbock depot.”

“Please,” said Heering and waved at the phone, “help yourself.”

A passenger arriving in Amarillo at five would miss the last bus to Fort Gander by forty-five minutes, Port learned. Such a passenger could catch the first bus to Fort Gander at seven A.M. and would get there at noon. Another bus that was strictly local and not Greyhound franchise. That same line had a scheduled run from Fort Gander to Cuevas, Dry Waters, and New Sevastopol at two in the afternoon. If that bus ran on that day it should reach Dry Waters at maybe five-thirty.

“There’s time for tomorrow’s phone call,” said Port and then went to bed.

Heering, at nine in the morning, had made one phone call to Galveston, but Ebberhouse hadn’t been in. Port and Heering sat in the same room, not

talking, ignoring each other, which was how they played it.

Port took out a cigarette and looked up.

"Can you spare me a plane?" he asked Heering.

"To go where?"

"I can beat Powell to Dry Waters," said Port. "It would make things easy that way."

"Can you fly?"

"No."

"Then I can't give you a plane."

"It's a gamble by car," said Port.

"I have no holdings in the Dry Waters area. I could give the pilot no reasonable pretext for taking you there."

It was hard to tell, sometimes, what was most important to Heering: to get back his son as fast as possible or to observe his secretive habits.

"I can get you a State trooper's car," Heering said. "With markings, light, siren. You can make the distance in five hours easily, traffic or no traffic."

"And let everybody in the Dry Waters area know I'm out hunting?"

"I'm sure you can handle that some way," said Heering, and then the phone buzzed.

Ebberhouse's men had been active. They knew that Powell shot pool for money, making small bets winning more often than not; they knew that everybody thought he was a retired cotton man and that he was liked well enough, mostly, it seemed, because he never tried to strike up any close acquaintances; that he doted on his wife and only talked about her in pleasant platitudes. They had also learned that he paid his bills regularly, that his monthly bills were from normal to low, with the exception of his electric bill. Port knew why that was. And, Ebberhouse's men had found out, his telephone use had jumped suddenly.

"He called Houston twice and then Galveston," said Ebberhouse.

"When?"

"That's it. All one after the other and in the middle of the night. That was night before last."

That was when Robert had gone there.

"You know whom he called?"

"The first Houston number was in the name of a Joseph Flynn. There was no answer. The second Houston number is listed as Antonio Martinez, realtor. We happen to know who that is."

“Who?”

“He runs three whore houses. The call was person-to-person and Martinez answered.”

“Would you know what was said?”

“No. I’m sorry. We got this information from the records and the phone company doesn’t listen in.”

“Maybe you know how long the call took?”

“Yes. Twenty minutes. And the next call right after that, to a Galveston number. That call lasted just about half an hour.”

“To whom?”

“The Gulfboat Park. That’s a dance hall, sort of, with an all night restaurant right on the water and a golf link on the other side and a yacht harbor. This isn’t a country club, you understand, but more like—”

“Who owns it, Mr. Ebberhouse?”

“Joseph Flynn.”

“Was the call person-to-person?” Port asked.

“No. Just the number of The Gulfboat Park. We don’t know who answered.”

Port thought he knew who had answered and had talked for half an hour: Powell’s old hero and one-time boss, the operator who was big with the bums at the docks, Joseph, Flynn.

“Do you happen to know,” Port asked Ebberhouse, “when there’s a flight leaving Lubbock for Galveston?”

“Two. Seven-thirty and eleven, all in the P.M. I’ve taken them often enough,” Ebberhouse added.

But it didn’t fit.

“Do you know how long a fast train takes to the same destination?”

“Let me check,” said Ebberhouse, and it took almost five minutes. He came back and said, “The fastest is the one they call *Black Crow*, but you’d miss it, I’m afraid. It runs once a day only, ten A.M. Gets to Galveston at three in the afternoon. Practically nonstop.”

“Thank you,” said Port, “I’ll try it tomorrow.”

They hung up after that and now Port knew one more thing.

“How far is your Galveston building from the railroad station?” he asked Heering.

“A five minute walk, I’d say.”

“That comes out right. I think I know how Powell got his letter into your

mailbox while he was on his way to Dry Waters in the opposite direction. He sent it along with somebody who went to Galveston on the *Black Crow*, some acquaintance most likely, or a poolroom friend who got a bill out of the errand, and it's likely that Flynn met the man at the station to see everything came off. The train gets to Galveston at three, your building is five minutes away, and the letter was dropped there, by your report, a while after three."

"Why," said Heering, "this hurry to deliver the letter?"

"Has nothing to do with hurry," said Port. "The main thing was, Powell wanted to mail it from someplace where he wasn't. That it got there so fast was chance, and our luck."

Heering nodded and said nothing else until he had reached for the phone.

"I'll arrange for the highway patrol car," he said and picked up the phone.

"Don't bother," said Port. "I'm going to Galveston."

Chapter X

BUT BEFORE leaving, Port wanted to see Jane.

It was part of everything Port was doing. It had nothing to do with love. The way Port had decided it when Heering had forced him, there was just one motive left, till it was over, and the old Heering was all of it.

Heering stood in the big hall and looked up. He watched Port come all the way down the stairs and then said, "The car is ready."

"I know," said Port and was looking elsewhere.

"My daughter," said Heering, "is no longer in the house. I'll say good-bye to her for you—when I see her."

They looked at each other and Port held his teeth together, because he was thinking, *You sonofabitch, you lousy sonofabitch, you got one jump ahead of me.*

"I thought it best," Heering explained, "considering the damage you have done already."

Port came down the rest of the way and said, "I haven't seen your daughter since you came back."

"I have. I saw her last night." Heering picked up a coat he had lying on one of the chairs and then his hat. "My daughter and I have never been very close, however we haven't been enemies. The car is waiting, Mr. Port," and Heering stood by the door.

She wasn't in the house—no point staying. Fly to Galveston with the old bastard and do what you can...

"You sent her away?" Port asked when he walked down the outside stairs.

"Don't bother trying to pump me, Mr. Port. You will have no further contact with her. Do your job, deliver my son, and then leave my family. You do that, Mr. Port," Heering stopped beside the car, waiting for the chauffeur to open the door, "and I may well leave it at that."

What I'll be leaving you is going to be more like a mine field, thought Port. He kept thinking about this while Heering got into the car, and it helped.

But when Port started into the car the chauffeur suddenly slammed the door. Port, it seemed, would sit with the help.

Heering was inside the car and Port and the chauffeur stood outside, close together. The chauffeur talked low and fast. "There's a mineral springs resort

fifty miles from here. Blackwell. You should call her there, any time. Blackwell Hotel—” and then the chauffeur opened the door again, apologized audibly, and the rest of the trip—from the house to the airstrip, from the airstrip to the Galveston field, from the Galveston field to Heering’s building—was silence between Heering and Port, each with his own plans.

There was a parking space in front of the building reserved for Heering’s car. They stopped and got out.

“Wait in the basement garage,” said Heering, “until word is sent down to furnish you with a car. And as I see it, there is no point in your calling me before tomorrow.”

“I’ll call you when I’ve got something,” said Port.

And with the organized logic which made Heering the man that he was, he accepted this, keeping apart in his mind the man Port whom he hated and the man Port who had said he would deliver his son and therefore would do so.

Joseph Flynn wore a cheap suit which didn’t fit his big body and the striped shirt he had on showed a frayed edge on the collar. Because Flynn was fat he kept the collar open and the necktie was pulled down which made it show the wrong side.

But his shoes cost sixty-eight dollars and he wore silk underwear with a monogram in it. Since none of that showed, it was all right, and when Flynn wasn’t in Galveston he didn’t wear the same clothes.

He sat like that at his old desk in The Gulfboat Park, said nothing. He had a can of beer next to him on the desk and the beer had been standing there going flat. There was a long line outside the room, an especially long one which went all the way to the end of the corridor and the last man in line could look down the stairs. He could see the big dance hall, the floor-waxing machine going back and forth, then only the cord which snaked across the big hall; and the man was still standing there when the lights went on down there and the waxing machine was turned off.

The change in sound made everyone in the long line stop talking and they wondered why Joe wouldn’t open the door. One time this had happened, the line not moving, and that day there hadn’t been any hand-outs. They hadn’t known it, but Joe hadn’t even been there. And they hadn’t known why, until Joe Flynn got out of prison thirty days later, and that day had been the only day the line had been longer than now.

They stood in line, worrying. The door stayed closed.

"I don't know any Dan Port," Flynn said. "I know everybody who might be thinking he wants to muscle in here, Tully, and there's *nobody* wants to muscle in here."

Tully and a white-haired man, Bill, nodded at that because Flynn was waiting for it. But nobody talked. They had talked this thing back and forth for a long time and it hadn't helped. There was just this man, Port, talking like a damn foreigner, toting a gun, and threatening to shoot everyone in sight if he didn't get in to see Flynn.

"Maybe he's crazy," said Flynn.

"Then why don't he use that gun?" said the white-haired man. "He's so crazy, why don't he shoot, instead of just threatenin'?"

"That's right," said Tully. "At least shoot in the ceiling! Now if I was crazy—"

"Shut up, Tully," said Flynn. He felt disgusted and a little bit dizzy. Hadn't eaten enough that day. And now, this. He pushed the warm beer can around a few times and said, "I may not know this Port, but he's sure gonna know me."

The two men in the office with him picked up their heads and listened.

"Tell you what," Flynn continued. "You go on downstairs, Tully, and round up some of the fellers—you know who to pick. When you got six or seven together, have 'em take ahold of this crazy man and bring him up to me. Open the door now, Tully."

Tully got up from his chair and walked very carefully toward the door.

"And tell those bums to keep their britches on, or else," Flynn called after him.

But when Tully opened the door there was nobody left in the corridor, no line, not even one grifter. Only Port stood there. He nodded at everyone and then he walked in.

"Close the door, Tully," he said.

Tully closed the door. The man with the white hair just gaped, and Joe Flynn, a fat hulk behind the old desk, mottled a little.

"Where—where," he got out, "is the bums?"

"I sent them away. You and me, Flynn, want privacy."

"You sent them—"

"Yes. A little trick I have," and Port took out a policeman's badge. "I flashed this and they ran."

“Mary and Joseph!” said Tully and he kept looking from, the door to Joe Flynn and back, since one or the other would be his answer.

“You like it so much,” said Port, “let me give it to you.” He walked over to Tully. “See? It says, ‘Junior Deputy, Eat Your Oaties,’” and Port put the badge into Tully’s hand.

“You’re no cop!” Flynn managed.

“Clever,” said Port.

He walked to the desk, sat down on a chair that he found there, and crossed his legs. Flynn shifted his weight, and with a great moaning of springs let his swivel chair tilt back at an angle. The new posture, with feet dangling above the ground, gave Flynn the look of a sleeping boy.

“Before anything else, let’s hear your story,” he said. “I’m fair. Start with that.”

“First you send out your sidekicks, Flynn, and then you and me will get this over with.”

“And what if I don’t?” said Flynn. “What’ll you do then, Mr. Wiseguy?”

“I’ll explain it right in front of them. I’m talking about Heering and Powell...”

“What’s he saying?” Tully came up. “You mean you do know this guy?”

Flynn was sore, suddenly, and had to give it to somebody.

“Get outa here,” he said to Tully. “Get the hell outa here and don’t show your face ’til I call you! And you too! Now git!”

They did this quickly, closing the door behind them without any noise.

“Now you!” and Flynn looked at Port. Flynn was still sore and in no mood to hide it. “Now let’s have none of that gun waving with me! That don’t count for nothing with me here alone. You got that?”

“Of course,” said Port.

“So what’s this gaff with Heering and whoozit? Start with that!”

“When you say whoozit, I assume you—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean Herbie. I mean that Herbie Powell bastard.”

Instead of relieving himself with his shouting, Joe Flynn only became more upset. He grabbed for the can with the warm beer, and not until he had taken a gluttonous swallow did he remember how lousy warm beer is. He hefted the can into a corner and spat out what he had in his mouth. He cursed, wiped himself, and walked to a door which didn’t lead to the hall.

The adjoining room was nothing like the one they had just left. There was a small bar, with built-in refrigerator, leather chairs and a leather couch. And

whoever had done the decorating had felt that old hunting prints were the right thing to have around Flynn. Those prints were arranged all over the walls, and in one corner was a stuffed fox.

“You like riding to the hounds?” Port asked.

“Shut up. You just sit down there and talk.”

Port sat and watched Flynn get cold beer from the refrigerator. Flynn got one can, opened it, drank most of it standing. After that he took off his jacket, got a silk robe out of a closet and wrapped himself in it, picked up his beer. Then he sat down in a leather chair and kept his eyes closed while the cushions sighed. After that he opened his eyes and looked at Port. Joe Flynn, so it seemed, was somebody else now. He looked right and comfortable inside his fat, and inside that fat was a sharp brain.

“Go ahead,” said Flynn, waiting.

“You delivered Powell’s letter?”

“Powell never sent no letter to me,” said Flynn. “How come you know Herbie Powell?”

Port sighed. “Herbie Powell isn’t very smart. All he had was the setup. I found out about it and rigged up this snatch.”

“Snatch?”

“Kidnaping, Flynn.”

“Go ahead.”

“That means fifty-fifty for me and Herbie. I’m down here to find out where in hell you come in.”

Flynn, too fat for fast bending, put his beer can down very slowly, but when he came up again his face showed a different mood. Flynn was suddenly boiling with rage, and he started cursing with a filthy violence.

“... suck me in on a sucker deal, will he? Get me to jumping in the middle of the night with a telephone call! Too big to come down here and set this up right. A telephone call in the middle of the night and yammering at me and moaning about all this loot coming his way and me, old buddy Joe, call up old buddy Joe for old times sake and to give him a cut. Fifty for you!” he yelled at Port. “Then where in hell’s fifty for me?”

Up to this point, then, Port had figured it right. Flynn was in on the deal.

“That’s why I’m down here,” said Port. “And I apologize.”

“What’s that?”

“For thinking you were a chiseler. Powell’s the chiseler.”

“Ahh...” Flynn said, and let himself sink back into the chair, face turned

up toward the ceiling.

“Better get Powell down here,” said Port.

And now Flynn was himself again. “Get him down here?” said Flynn. “You sound like you’re doing me a favor.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Flynn.”

“Then why get him down here. Why aren’t you wherever Herbie is, huh? That makes only two of you, that way.”

“You know where Herbie is,” said Port. “Could I maneuver up there and find him, if he decided to hide?”

“City boy, huh?”

“Dry Waters,” said Port, “is the moon, as far as I’m concerned.”

“It is,” said Flynn. “Just exactly like it, up there.”

Which showed Port that Flynn knew where Powell was.

“The truth is,” and Port told the truth, “I’d be lost chasing him all over his home territory, but down here I can maneuver.”

“Why would you be chasing him? I thought you and him—”

“Don’t you know about Herbie yet?” said Port, sounding weary. “He’s a chiseler, I told you.”

“I see that. I can see that good.”

“And stupid. Take for instance that letter to Heering. You dropped that letter for him?”

Flynn nodded, because it had sounded like an aside, and admitting that part seemed of little importance.

“You got that letter off a guy at the railroad station, isn’t that right?”

“That’s how we set it up.”

Port was happy to hear he had figured it right.

“You know the man who gave you the letter?”

“Some buddy of Powell’s. Some salesman buddy from the bowling club, and he was coming down to Galveston anyway. We both wore a carnation,” said Flynn.

Port almost laughed, but kept it down.

“That shows you, Flynn, what I mean. A thing like that letter, as important as that, and he sends it down here with some stupid drummer! A guy who could have got drunk on the train, or maybe get himself rolled by some hooker he picks up on the way—”

“Yeah,” said Flynn. “Yeah, yeah...” and he was thinking about it.

“And the same thing with that stupid stunt of going up there in the

wilderness, that Dry Waters place. All out of touch, so few people up there he's bound to attract attention. And maybe that Heering kid suddenly gets impatient. Maybe he doesn't believe all of a sudden that Powell is doing this thing for his own good. He starts smelling a rat, he doesn't like sleeping in some windy shack, eating cold beans and so forth. Why, man, here's a million bucks or so riding on Powell's half-ass planning, a million bucks teetering out of sight because of that dumb stumble bum up there!"

"Yeah! And I argued with him! Over the phone I was trying to tell him!"

"And here he goes to the trouble," Port kept it up, "to get you into the thing, to help handle this thing, and then what does he do? Use you to deliver a letter, for God's sake!"

"Damn his hide, yes!"

"And you know why, Flynn? For the same reason he left me with my mouth hanging open. He gets the best out of me he can, and then skips. He gets the best advice out of you and then he tries it alone. He needs you like a hole in the head, is Powell's opinion."

It worked. It worked so well Port got impatient with Flynn's lengthy cursing. But when Flynn had calmed down and sat still again, he said, "Maybe you got other reasons for wantin' him here. Like you said, you can't move so good in a place like Dry Waters. But down here..."

The whole thing was a stall, Port figured. At one time or another, Powell would come down to Galveston anyway, or wherever the hide-out was going to be, because that would have been part of the plan whether Port pushed or not.

Port's main reason for working through Flynn was to make the job clean. If Port caught Powell and Robert Heering, up in some shack in the panhandle, he might manage to get Robert away, but not Powell, not two men at the same time. And then Powell would still run around with his tongue hanging out, and more so, Joe Flynn. There wouldn't be anything to keep them from trying again.

They had to get burned, and both of them.

Port got off the couch and walked over to Flynn. He put his hands in his pockets and stood in front of the man without saying anything for the moment. When Flynn started to frown Port started to talk, as if this was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I guess you know Powell's angle. Do you?"

"About Emmy Semmerling? Sure I do."

“So you know,” said Port, “that it all depends on her.”

“No problem. I met her once. And she’s Herbie’s wife.”

“Did you know she’s a wino?” said Port.

Flynn hadn’t known. The thought was disturbing.

“You know about winos then, about how unreliable they are.”

“She’s still the mother of that Heering kid, drunk or sober.”

“Who says, Emmy herself?”

“Powell says! That’s what the whole thing’s about!”

“The hell with Powell!”

Flynn hoisted himself around in the chair, very uncomfortable. He hated looking up, and Port was still standing in front of him. And he hated to see things get complicated.

“So come on,” he said. “About this angle. Start with that.”

“Emmy Semmerling, or Mrs. Herbert Powell, she doesn’t remember so good. Those winos, you know—”

“Come on, dammit, get to it!”

“I know this from talking to her, when I was with Powell. Now, if she leaves home, if she goes out of reach, and old Heering should get to her, how long do you think it’ll take him to get a deposition out of her, signed, sealed, and paid for, that she never slept with Carl Heering, never had a son, and maybe is even a virgin? How long, Flynn?”

“Good God—”

“Then Robert Heering wouldn’t be worth a red cent.”

This time it really worked.

“I’m gonna pick that sonofabitch up myself!” and Flynn wrestled himself out of the chair.

“When you going to be back?” Port asked him.

Flynn went to his closet, took off the silk wrapper, and put on his coat. He gave Port one sideways look but didn’t answer.

Port lit a cigarette and talked very quietly.

“You might as well face it, Flynn. You don’t shake me. Nobody does.”

“All right. But we got to talk this whole thing over yet, about the split.”

“I’m willing to split.”

“We’ll talk about that when I get back.”

“I’m willing. When will you be back?”

“You mean you aren’t coming along?” Flynn said this hopefully.

“Not if you tell me where and when we’re going to meet.”

“Trusting, aren’t you?” Flynn put on his hat.

“I can afford it. I can take Powell’s wife up to Heering myself.”

Flynn almost choked on the picture of that, and then he just nodded. He didn’t open the door, the way he had planned, but came back and explained.

“You know Route 87, from here to Port Arthur?”

“Like the palm of my hand.”

“Once you’re off the Bolivar peninsula you come to Route 124, going north. Where it crosses the waterway—”

“What waterway?”

“Intercoastal waterway, for pete’s sake, the canal!”

“All right. The canal.”

“Right there, over the bridge, you come to the maintenance road that goes off to the right.”

“It’s open?”

“No. But you go there just the same. You drive down there after five-thirty and there won’t be anyone at the maintenance sheds. You go to the second way-house, not the first, the second, and that’s where I’ve got it set up.”

“No cops, no canal men, nothing?”

“Taken care of,” said Flynn.

“When?”

“I’m flying up as far as I can. Amarillo, I guess. I’ll rent a car there or take the bus, I don’t know yet. And the same way back. Figure the second day.”

“Okay,” said Port and watched Flynn go to the door. He let him go so far and then stopped him.

“One more thing.”

Flynn turned, his heavy face dark and way off.

“Maybe Powell won’t want to come. Maybe once he sees you and finds out I got to you, he’ll start snowing you, the way Powell knows how.”

“I remember about Powell good. Don’t—”

“Get this, Flynn. Tell him, first off, that he’s made me sore. That I’m switching to Heering’s side and I’m after him, hot and bothered. So he better hightail it down here with you, where it’s safe. Got that clear?”

“Don’t worry,” said Flynn and opened the door.

“Just remember this,” said Port. “If you don’t show up the way you explained it—because you changed your mind, because Powell changed it for

you—then remember I'm going to get Emmy Powell. You can start with that," said Port, and then they both left the building without saying any more to each other.

Now Herbie Powell could talk his head off once he heard about Port. Whether Powell believed Flynn or Flynn believed Powell, it would come to the same thing: Port was in.

He made two phone calls. He called Heering to lend him a plane, and he called Jane, to tell her to meet him.

Chapter XI

IT WAS completely dark when Port got to 912 South Brandywine. The street was empty and the nightwind funneled against him, cold and unpleasant. And Emmy Powell, or Semmerling, would be sitting in her warm room, the flowery housedress wrapped around her body, the wine warm inside her, cloudy and comfortable.

It would be an unpleasant visit, but he knew of no other way. The image of Heering was riding him.

It took her a while to open the door, but then she stood there and smiled.

“Mr. Port! Did you find your little black book?” and she stood there hoping he had. “Come in, Mr. Port. Herbie isn’t in right now, but come in.”

He came in and while Emmy Powell sat down in her chair, Port stood by the television set. Then he said, “Do you mind if I turn that off?”

“Why—why, yes, go ahead,” and she smiled uncertainly.

Port snapped off the set and sat down on the hassock close by her chair. Sitting the way he was he had to look up at her and she smiled back at him.

“You want to tell me about Robert?” she said.

Perhaps she was much less of a wino than Port had thought, and much less confused.

“He told us how nice you were, what a nice young man...” She was looking off now, at the wall. Then she looked at Port again, smiling politely. “What I don’t understand yet is you being a utility man here in Lubbock, and also a friend of Robert’s. I don’t see...”

Emmy Powell, and what she knew, would be no help. Port took a deep breath and then took out a cigarette.

“You mind if I smoke?”

“Oh, no. Go right ahead, Mr. Port. Herbie smokes. Herbie isn’t here, you know, but if you’d care to visit a spell—not that I expect Herbie tonight any more.”

“That’s all right, Mrs. Powell.”

“They left the same night, you know. Robert was so grateful—I’m not sure they should have left, but then they both said it was best.”

Port wasn’t sure of anything. Emmy Powell was much too vague.

“How was it, Mrs. Powell, finding your son again after all these years?”

She looked at the wall again and said, "Well, it's hard for me to say. But I had to cry..."

Port saw she was smiling when she said this, though the meaning wasn't clear.

"But then," she went on, looking at Port, "with all the time since the baby, and everything since then, he was mostly a young man to me. A very nice young man..." She reached for her wineglass and took a sip. "I don't mean to shock you, Mr. Port. And he's such a nice young man."

Port wasn't shocked. He thought Emmy Powell's admission was the first clearly sane thing she had said.

"It couldn't be any other way," he said. "Though perhaps it shouldn't have happened."

"Oh? But I loved having the baby. I remember that."

It was a cruel thing to see what had happened to the woman since then.

"Mrs. Powell," said Port. "This young man, Robert Heering. You keep calling him a very nice young man—"

"Yes. Except I thought he was terribly shy, you know what I mean? And upset."

"Well, considering the circumstances..."

"I mean altogether. Not just because of him and me meeting like this."

"Yes. Which is why I've come back, Mrs. Powell. Why I've come back to ask you a favor."

"I don't think his father treated him right," she said, half to herself. Then she took up her glass again and sipped.

"You felt this, or Robert told you about it?"

"Well now, he did tell about having this trouble, not getting along with his father. That's why Herbie took the boy along, you know, to find him a place where he can get a rest and not be bothered by anything. But I felt it. If he hadn't said so, I would still have felt it." She sighed to herself and looked at the wall.

Emmy Powell, Port thought, was very much the same woman she had been a long time ago; a warm, simple female, with feelings about people. Only the alcohol had been added.

"Would you like to see Robert again?" Port asked her.

"Again? Why, of course. He said he'd like to see me again." It was shallow, thought Port, but what else could he do. At least it was genuine.

"It would mean, Mrs. Powell, seeing Carl Heering again." This was the

point.

This was the way it would have to be, to break the old Heering, or to break his he, and Robert would be there to see it.

“You mean—Carl? After all these years?” And in a while she said, “I don’t know... Maybe he doesn’t even remember me.”

“Carl Heering? Listen to me, Mrs. Powell—”

“And I think I’m a little afraid of him.”

“Carl Heering,” said Port, “is afraid of *you*.”

It was close to an hour now, and Port kept listening for sounds from outside, hoping that Jane would come soon.

“Afraid of *me*?” said Emmy Powell.

Port considered the woman and how much he could tell her without confusing the issue. He told her how Robert had lived, how the old Heering had taken it out on the son, and that Robert was close to the end of his rope. Port left out the part Herbert Powell was playing, to stay with one thing at a time.

“It means so little to you, Mrs. Powell. It just means something to Robert Heering. And he’s a nice young man—”

“I wouldn’t know what to do, Mr. Port.”

“Nothing. Just be there, Mrs. Powell,” and Port thought of the contrast she would make, sitting there in a chair and Carl Heering opposite.

A car drove by outside and Port looked at his watch. An hour had passed.

“I don’t think,” she said, “Carl would like it. After all these years gone by...”

Time was pushing him, and more so the failure; how to move this woman, budge her through the fog.

“Look,” he said. “I’m talking to you because I have two reasons for pushing. One’s my own. Frankly, I don’t like Mister Heering. I started with that one. It’s the reason that got me in. But the other one’s growing on me. I’m not saying I like Robert, I hardly know him. But he’s down and out. And that means something to me.” Port felt better now. “And that part, I mean Robert, can mean a great deal more to you—”

“Is there someone outside?” said Emmy Powell.

Port hadn’t heard anything, but Emmy Powell was more used to the noises of the house and the wind outside. Port got up, turned the light off in the hall, then opened the door. It pushed into his hand, because of the wind, and then he heard the sound from the corner, a high-powered roar, and the

convertible shot into the street. It slowed then and came along the street in low gear.

Port knew the car. He stepped out on the street and waved at it till the girl behind the wheel saw him. Jane stopped where Port was and got out of the car.

“Dan—” Then she looked at the house behind him. “Is that where she is?”

“Yes. You must have driven like a demon,” he said. “I thought you would get a plane.”

Jane paid no attention to the remark. Instead she asked, “Does she know yet, about coming along?”

“She knows, but I don’t know if she’s willing.”

“But her own son!”

They walked across the street and went into the house. Emmy Powell stood in the arch and smiled when the two people came in. She looked from Port to the girl and waited.

“Mrs. Powell,” said Port, “this is Jane Heering. She—”

“Oh yes!” and Emmy Powell held out her hand. “You’re my son’s half-sister. He mentioned you,” and then she waved them into the room. “You look a little bit like him,” she said when Jane passed her.

Neither Port nor the girl said anything right away. Emmy Powell—and they both had heard it—had called Robert her son.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Emmy Powell, “if I don’t have to go alone, I’d like to do what you said, Mr. Port.”

If it had been any other times they would have sat down now and talked, some tea maybe, and some of Emmy Powell’s wine. But Port didn’t think that Joe Flynn would let this go by, knowing about Emmy Powell, and the threats Port had made. He got up, looked out of the window, came back.

“You won’t be alone,” he said. “Jane is here, to go along, and I’ll come with Robert. And while you’re with Jane, she’ll explain more to you. I’m afraid there isn’t time now—”

Neither of the two women knew why he was rushing them. They looked up at him and Port had to spend time explaining more. Flynn or his man could have been here half an hour ago. Port walked back and forth, making it urgent. He told Mrs. Powell that they had to leave now, that the old Heering didn’t want any of this to happen and he might send someone to stop Jane from taking her. He didn’t think he had to make too much sense for Emmy

Powell, that the sense of pressure would be enough to convince her. And Port counted on Jane to take the cue. She knew, since his phone call, what had happened to Robert and what had happened in Galveston.

"I can't believe..." Emmy Powell was saying, when the taxi drove past the house for the second time.

Port stepped away from the window and the change in his voice was enough.

"Is there a hotel in this town?" he said to Jane.

"Well, there's the Jefferson. It's not the best—"

"Never mind that now. I want you to take Mrs. Powell and go there immediately. If you can't get a room—"

"I can get a room," she said, which reminded Port that Heering owned a good part of Galveston and probably more of Lubbock.

The taxi was gone, not that it meant anything. While Emmy Powell and Jane got into the car, Port kept looking around. Maybe the cab had stopped before disappearing, and left off a fare—

Two headlights swung into the street, came slowly closer.

"Don't go yet," said Port. "Hold it," and he put his hand on the steering wheel of Jane's car.

The headlights kept Port from seeing too well, so he didn't know that the car was a taxi until it was almost up to him.

And then the taxi stopped abreast.

It was empty, except for the driver.

"My mistake," said the driver. "I thought you were somebody else."

"Your fare?" said Port.

"Uh-huh," said the cabby. "I guess I keep cruising." But when he started up Port leaned into the window and the cabby had to stop.

"Your fare coming from that house?"

"Yeah. He still in there?"

"He'll be right out," said Port. "Why don't you pull up to the curb," and when the taxi had moved Port turned to Jane.

"Just do what I say now. Drive off slowly and allow the taxi to follow you. Circle around and bring him back here. Don't let him catch up! Just make him follow and stop here again, got that?"

"I—all right," she said.

"First, put up your top."

Emmy Heering understood very little of this, and Jane didn't understand

very much more. But she did what Port said. While the convertible top hummed up and over the car Port walked away. He didn't go fast, not wanting too much distance between himself and the car, or it would mean his man might make a rush. But Port kept walking, hand on his gun, and then Jane's car took off in the opposite direction.

Port was in the shadow enough to risk turning around. Jane's convertible was halfway to the end of the street, the taxi was standing, when the man came running across. Port couldn't see who it was, but he came from the back of a house, Emmy Powell's house, maybe, and jumped into the cab. The cab followed Jane's car.

Port pressed himself flat against the side of Powell's house and waited...

Chapter XII

FIRST ONE PAIR of headlights swung into the street and then the other. The two cars were not far apart. The first car, the convertible, started to slow, and for a moment it looked like the taxi was going to pass it. But now the first car was pulling over, meaning to stop, so the taxi stayed behind, quite close now, and just followed suit.

Port waited. He felt himself shiver, knowing it had nothing to do with the cold.

The convertible stopped, but the headlights were still on. He should have told Jane to turn off her lights once she stopped. A door opened, the door of the taxi, and Jane's headlights were still on.

The taxi door slammed.

"Just hold still, lady..."

The headlights went off.

"I'd just as soon break the window and drag you out, lady. And that wouldn't be all—"

Port sprinted.

He didn't know if the man had a gun and he didn't care. He heard the convertible rock on its springs and then heard the door fly open. The man sounded angry.

"And just for that, lady, I'm gonna give—" when the word became a hoarse push of air coming out of his mouth, with the Luger barrel knifing his kidneys and Port's arm choking his neck, yanking the head up in the air.

"Drive!" said Port. "Come on, you know where to go! For heaven's sake, Jane, jump to it!"

She roared off, finally, closing the door while under way and forgetting to put on the headlights till she turned the far corner.

The man wasn't Flynn—not fat enough. Port let go suddenly and with a fast trip at one shin helped him fall down.

"Tully!"

Tully stayed on the pavement, not moving, because he saw the gun and he knew about Port in general.

But all this was new to the cabby and unexpected. He came out of the cab and started to holler, but he could see the gun well enough and shut his mouth

when the muzzle turned his way.

“Come here.” Port had stepped back to watch both men.

The man came closer, like a doll on a string.

“Hop in your cab,” said Port, “and drive like hell.”

“Yes, sir!”

“And I’m taking your number. Any cops show up here, or anything like that, and you’ll be too dead tomorrow to do anything else.”

Port heard feet scrambling, door thumping shut, and the cab taking off like a streak.

“Get up, Tully.”

Tully did. Port grabbed his arm, and together they made their way up the steps and into the Powell house. Port snapped on a light in the living room, drew the shades, and told Tully to lean against the wall. In Tully’s clothes he found one gun, one spring knife, a sap, nylon cord, and a wad of cotton which could be used as a gag.

“Sit down, Tully. In the couch there.”

It was a very soft couch and Tully sank into it. He rubbed the sweat in his palms and glared at Port.

“How come you’re in on this, Tully? I thought Flynn was keeping the help out of this thing.”

“Noo Yorker,” said Tully after a while, which was the worst insult he could think of at the moment.

Port sat down on the hassock and started to toss the Luger from one hand into the other. “Where’s Flynn?” he asked suddenly.

The question caught Tully unawares, and all he said was “Huh?” Port asked him again and this time hit the man over the nose.

But it didn’t make Tully talk. The slap had startled him and then he sat rigid while the slow wave of pain traveled all through him. It left him exhausted and even his impulse to jump and hit back wasn’t there any more.

“Where’s Flynn?” Port asked again, but Tully just sat there, hunched over. His fear of Flynn was still greater than his fear of Port.

“Look, Tully,” Port said, and now he was caressing the Luger, rubbing it gently between his palms, “I need information. If you won’t give with it, you’re no good to me. And if you’re no good to me, then from my point of view, you’re better off dead.” With this, Port raised the Luger in his hand, sighted right between Tully’s eyes, and said, “Well, might as well get it over —”

That did it.

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you! But Jeez, put that thing down!" and Tully's face was frightened now.

Port lowered the hand with the Luger, sat down on the hassock. "Okay, Tully. Let's start with question number one. Where's Flynn?"

"He said he was going up to Amarillo some place. Honest!"

"I believe you, Tully."

"He isn't going to Amarillo itself. I thought you know he was picking up Powell up there."

"Yes," said Port. Then it occurred to him. "You know where, outside of Amarillo?"

"Place called Margarita. That's where Powell is staying."

"Not Dry Waters?"

"That's where he wanted to go but Flynn told him nix. I wasn't there when Powell phoned. I didn't even know from nothing 'til just today."

Port thought this over. First of all Flynn had lied to him, bothering to lie over a little thing like Dry Waters versus Margarita. Not so little. Margarita was closer to Amarillo, much closer probably, and then Flynn had said he'd be two days.

"When's Flynn coming back with Powell and company?" Tully wiped his mouth and sat back.

"Tomorrow. The canal place was to be ready tomorrow."

Port sat on the hassock and lowered his head. That way Tully couldn't see his expression. Port was cursing himself for the near-slip, and the new pressure. Tomorrow!

"Now, listen, Port. I been square with you, haven't I? Wouldn't you say ___"

"Yes. Thank you."

"What I mean is, if, you're done now, no more questions or anything, why not call it quits here and now? You know, I been square with you, and now you just forget about meeting me—I won't say a word—and let me go, huh, Port? I'll just blow—"

The question now was what to do with Tully.

"Come on," said Port and went to the front door.

Tully jumped up from the couch. He was even smiling. He ran over to where Port was waiting and meant to open the door for Port. One good turn—

Port clipped him over the ear with the Luger and watched him sag to the

floor. He was going to have a long sleep...

Chapter XIII

JANE ANSWERED the phone almost immediately, and Port could feel the hysterical edge in her voice. She asked if he were all right, if she'd done all right, if it were safe now, and Port said yes each time she asked a question, letting her talk it off for a while. The strain on her, Port knew, would get worse.

"Now, Jane. Listen to me."

"Yes, Dan, yes."

"How is Mrs. Powell?"

"Fine, fine. She's gone to bed, Dan. I bought her some wine and she had some of that and went to bed a little while ago."

"Asleep?"

"Yes. I can hear her. You know—"

"Jane. Listen to me."

"Yes, Dan. What?"

"Is the Jefferson Hotel large enough to have a nurse in attendance?"

"Well, I imagine they can call someone in from the hospital..."

"Then get a nurse or somebody to stay with Mrs. Powell, Jane, and come back here. You understand?"

"To that street?"

"Yes. I'm here. I need your car and I need you to come with me."

She hung up in the middle of saying good-bye, much too excited, and Port smoked three cigarettes while he waited for her in the front hall. Tully was on the floor. Port had taken the man's jacket off and draped it over him. On top of that he had put a blanket.

When Jane had stopped at the curb she ran up to the house. Port held the door open for her and she came into the hall. The first thing she saw was Tully on the floor.

"Oh, my God—"

"He's alive, Jane. Come here. Don't stare..."

"Oh, my God," she said again and Port had to turn her around forcibly.

He turned her towards him and put his arms around her back.

"How much longer," she said. "How much more of this, Dan?"

"It's almost over."

“And all this,” she said, “and all this because thirty years ago—”

“No. Nothing’s that simple. Listen to me, Jane. About now.”

“Yes,” she said and moved out of his arms. “What happened to him?”

“I hit him back of the ear with the Luger. He needs a hospital.”

She could look at the man now and just see what was really there. A man passed out, with a welt on his head. And she had caught the rush behind Port’s words, the pressure to finish.

“Open the car door and I’ll bring him out.”

They committed the man to the Heering Memorial Hospital, private room, and gave instructions not to let him out. Miss Heering herself would come back in the morning, with further instructions. The whole thing, she explained, was a delicate matter.

Then they drove to the airport.

“Tomorrow,” said Port, “if he listens to reason, just let him be. He’s got to stay there at least two days. If he tries to get out, if he acts too healthy or you’re worried in any way about what he might do, call the police. Have him charged with breaking and entering, on 912 South Brandywine. I don’t care if it sticks, but he mustn’t show up in Galveston between now and day after next.”

“It’ll be over then?” said Jane.

“I don’t know. But by then Robert will be back home.”

Port got out of the car, nodded at the girl, but did not try to smile. He just nodded at her and walked to the terminal. It was worse than being strangers...

Port took a room in Galveston and slept eight hours. He got up at ten in the morning, ate breakfast, and thought about the rest of the day. Flynn and his investment wouldn’t come to the canal house till after five, because before then the maintenance shed would still be busy. And Flynn would go to the house because he had told Tully the same thing, would expect Tully there with Emmy Powell.

It would help, Port thought, to look at the place.

He still had the old leather jacket from the time he had cased the Powell house and he put that on. He left his tie in the room but took the visored cap with him. Then he went out to rent a pickup truck.

The rental agencies wouldn’t do him any good because their trucks were marked with the agency’s name. He found what he wanted in a garage. The

pickup was olive drab, dusty and dented. There was an old battery in the back and a five gallon drum with a grease pump attachment. Port left all that on the truck and drove out of Galveston.

He didn't get to the canal road which Flynn had described until two, and at first he missed it. The road left the highway where one big tree and some bushes kept it from view, and then it followed the side of the canal. The canal itself was straight but the maintenance road wound back and forth. Port drove into the yard of the maintenance shed without having seen the buildings come up.

There were dump trucks, three grades of gravel in separate bins, and one big dragline, with the long arm lying flat on the ground. Three men were working on a pinched cable.

"Hey!" said one of them when he saw the pickup bounce into the yard.

Port needn't have gone into the yard. The road itself curved around and continued ahead. But the three men were looking now and Port's pickup was not official.

"This is state property, you know," said one of the men, coming towards the pickup.

Port had slowed, and when the man was close enough he thumbed at his load in the back and said, "Garage service. The guy called from the house further in—"

"How come he didn't call here? We got—"

"Beats me," said Port. "You know how it is, though," and he drove off again.

To the left of the yellow dirt road was scrub country and to the right was the canal. Port couldn't see the canal itself because the bank here was as high as his head. The high ground made a straight skyline without anything growing there. Further ahead, squatting on top of that line, sat the first way house.

Port stopped and climbed up on the bank. The house was a brick square with no windows. There was a steel door facing the road, and another one facing the canal. They were both painted green and both were locked.

If the other house looked the same it wouldn't make much of a hide-out. There was no cover of any sort and boats coming down the canal would be about on the same level as the small house.

Port got back into the truck and drove three miles to the next house. It looked exactly like the first, except here the door facing the canal was open.

The inside of the brick square was packed with a dull heat. There was little light, just what came in through the door, and the vague light which filtered through the vents up under the roof. The roof was raftered, with angled timbers and horizontal timbers from wall to wall. Some of the beams were boarded over, forming a platform under the roof, and wooden steps led up to it.

For the rest, there was nothing, just an empty square. The heat pressed into Port like a physical threat and the windowless walls made it worse. Robert Heering—or anyone else for that matter—could go mad in there.

Port stayed in the way house, squatting by the crack of the back door. He smoked, blowing the smoke out into the open because inside the house the air didn't move. They would come later and smell the smoke. From where he sat he could see four of his butts floating in the canal. At first they had all stayed together, circling a little and turning brown, but at one point they had suddenly moved. Perhaps a lock was sluicing things around, or the tide had changed or they had launched a ship... Port stayed with it as long as he could, because the time was dragging.

At five o'clock Port moved. First he drove the pickup deep into the brush, where it would be well hidden, Then he closed the door to the canal, opened the one which faced the road. They would come after five. He hoped soon after five.

They didn't come until ten.

They came into the house in the dark and Port, squatting on the wooden platform, could only tell by the sounds what was happening. The front door made a metallic snap, then one pair of footsteps went to the other door and there was a rattle. Both doors were closed now, and for a moment Port just heard breathing.

"Get one of the lights."

If he sees me, I'll shoot him now. I don't care who—

"Got it," said the man almost into Port's face.

Down below, they used several matches before they had the lamp lit and then the three foreshortened men stood around the lamp on the floor, with their shadows huge. They stood like that for a moment as if they didn't know what to do. Powell, Flynn, Robert Heering. They stood like that looking from one to the other, because there was a lot of unfinished business between them.

Then Robert Heering couldn't stand it any longer. He ran one hand over

his mouth and cleared his throat. "I want—I think I should have an explanation! Herbert," he said to Powell, "ever since this awful man—"

He never finished the sentence. Flynn hauled out one fat arm and with his open hand smacked the young Heering across one cheek. The force made Heering stumble, and, still off balance, he got an ugly kick from Flynn which threw him against the back door.

The steel made a hollow sound. Robert Heering sunk down there, and stayed, drawn together. It wasn't the pain that cowed him, but the fat man's dislike.

Now they started haggling like animals, Powell with a screech in his voice and Flynn bellowing.

"You push him around, Flynn, and you're pushing around what's mine! I don't go for your interference and I don't go—"

"You'll go to hell, Herbie-boy, mark my word! You don't double-cross me and get to heaven, not on your sweet life!"

"Double-cross? You're the one tied in with that Port! You're the one what's not needed and don't forget that!"

"Needed? I got this rich-boy right here, and I got his mother sewed up in the bargain! You keep forgetting that, Powell. You keep forgetting that Tully's got your old lady—"

This got Powell so mad he made a wild swing at Flynn, who just stepped back. Powell swung once again, maybe just to be swinging, because in the middle of it he started yelling again.

"You think I'm waiting around for that Tully to show up here? You can have the old lady! Take her! Keep her!" and he kept following Flynn, who was edging along the wall.

This was the chance Port had been waiting for. He picked up a hurricane lamp which he'd found on the platform and threw it towards Heering.

It made a frightening crash against the brick wall.

Powell spun around and Flynn moved very fast. He had his gun out of his pocket, ready for Heering, and for the moment both men didn't worry about each other, but just went at the young man by the back door.

It meant that the stairs were behind them.

The double fright of the crash and then the two men coming at him was almost too much for the Robert Heering. He froze with such an intensity that his jaw trembled. Flynn raised his gun high, maybe to rake the young man over the head.

“Hold still!”

The leap had brought Port in back of them, but only Powell stopped dead in his tracks. Flynn was too crazy mad.

He swung around with the gun, so Port shot him.

In the dead quiet they all watched the fat man weave. When he fell, if there was any emotion about it, it was relief. Powell exhaled, Robert Heering sprawled out on the floor, and Flynn let out a thick sigh.

“Stay where you are,” said Port, and Powell stopped moving. The gun on the floor wasn’t far from his feet. Flynn rolled a little and groaned.

“He’s alive?” said Powell.

With the light and the range it had been an easy shot. There would be a big stain under Flynn’s fat shoulder now, and if he kept moving like that it would come through his jacket.

“Robert,” said Port. “Get up and get that gun. Robert!” The young man got up then and went toward the gun. Then he hesitated, looking at Powell.

“Step back, Powell,” said Port.

There was no problem now about picking the gun up, but Robert Heering didn’t do it well. He moved slowly and when he straightened Port saw what it was. The man was afraid. He had the gun in his hand now, and he made a gesture with it, towards Port, and said, “Here. Maybe I should look at—at this man’s wound?”

“Keep the gun,” said Port. “And hold it this way.”

“Why? Aren’t we leaving?”

“Go up those steps,” said Port, “and see if there’s some rope up there.”

It must have been the noise Robert Heering made as he went up the steps, but Port didn’t know a thing until he felt the cold draft. And then when he swung around he stopped midway in the motion, not because Tully was there in the doorway with his gun held out, but because Jane was with him.

Chapter XIV

TULLY HAD a bandage around his head and a smile on his face. His arm was around the girl's waist, pinning her tightly to his side.

Port let his Luger drop to the floor, and said, "I give up."

This made Tully happy. He even let go of Jane and gave her a push into the room.

"Shoot, damn you! *Shoot!*" Port yelled.

Tully spun back and forth, but no one else moved, and there was no shot. And before Powell could shout a warning, Joe Flynn's gun fell to the bottom of the stairs, fell down with a smack and lay there on its side.

Tully watched Robert Heering come down the steps and the sight made him laugh. He reached back to close the door and he was still laughing when he looked back at Port.

Again Port said, "I give up," and now he leaned against the wall looking tired.

"Our bread-and-butter family stand right over there," said Tully, pointing to Robert and Jane, "and the Danny Port invasion stay right there leaning against that wall." Then Tully craned his neck and said, "You all right, Joe? Something wrong, Joe?"

Joe Flynn answered with a stream of filth and invective, and very carefully raised himself to a sitting position.

"Jeez!" said Tully when he saw the stain.

"You gonna leave those both guns lie there and rot?" Flynn bellowed.

Powell went to get Flynn's gun and Port's when Flynn said, "Not you, Jackass!"

"Herbie's out, too?" said Tully.

"Him, too."

"Ah..." said Tully and waved Herbert Powell to stand by the wall with the Heerings.

Then he picked up Flynn's gun and thumbed at the cylinder. The cylinder wouldn't spin.

"No wonder," he said and then looked at Robert Heering. "You shouldn't have dropped it," he said. "You should have brung it."

Robert Heering said nothing. He looked down at his hand where his sister

was holding it, and Port could see she was holding it very hard. She had one arm through Robert's and was holding his hand in both of hers.

Tully picked up the Luger and Flynn said he'd take it. He held it in his bad hand, on the side where he had been shot, and with the good hand he jackknifed the slide open, to check like Tully had done. A shell sprung out of the chamber and rolled on the floor. It showed Flynn that the gun was good and he put it into his pocket.

"And now?" asked Tully.

"Wait 'til I get up."

They all kept still and waited while Flynn worked himself up off the floor. Another minute passed while he guided his bad arm so the hand would rest in his jacket pocket, and then he came over to Port. While Tully covered, Flynn kicked Port in the shin.

Port did nothing. The gun was too close. He arched with the pain but did nothing else.

"And now!" Flynn turned on Tully and yelled at him. "How'd the dame get in this, and where's Powell's old lady?"

"This is Heering's daughter. She was with him, see," said Tully, "and he got there before I did, just like you figured—"

"I didn't figure he'd get there before you did," said Flynn. "What happened, he break your head?"

"No," said Tully. "He just slugged me out."

"And this dame here? How did she get in?"

Tully explained how Jane got in, how she took Emmy Powell some place and how she came back and drove him to the hospital; that he couldn't get out of there because of instructions, but how the girl came in the morning and then he, Tully, snowed her but good.

"I lie there and I figure the only way I can get out is by her say-so and the only way I can make her budge is by telling her something went wrong with her brother, see? After all—"

"Come on."

"So I tell her the only reason I'm after this Emmy Powell is because we slipped up with Robert and he's no good to us any more."

"Like what?"

"He got shot, see? *Escaping*. She believes this!" and Tully laughed. "And he's dying fast," he finished off.

Flynn just nodded.

“Clever, huh?” Tully prompted.

Flynn said nothing. His arm and his shoulder hurt badly and he was listening to something else.

Then they all heard it, a low thumping noise outside, coming closer.

“Take your gun,” Flynn said to Tully. “That must be the boat.”

Tully took his gun and Flynn got out the Luger. Then they had Powell open the door, and Port saw the canal water, heaving a little and sparkling.

The boat was an old tug which would attract no attention. It slid into view very slowly, with just the one forward motion, so that it looked for a moment as if the frame of the door was moving and not the boat.

Tully herded them over the plank and then below. Something clanked topside, something scraped, and then the big Diesel started puttering. They sat in the engine room, which was almost entirely taken up by the Diesel, and when it really started roaring the sudden noise of it almost split their heads.

It settled down in awhile and just rumbled. This sound didn’t hurt the ears any more, but there was an annoying vibration. Then the Diesel fumes got bad and Tully started looking green.

But he kept sitting there. They all sat, and the thicker the air became with the fumes, the more tension started to show. Powell, who sat on the floor, had a twitch in his face. Robert Heering, his eyes nervous and small, started biting his lip, and Jane took deep gasping breaths.

Port sat very still, holding back an urge to spring up. He had only one thought: how to time it. There was more than one way—a thousand of them kept chasing around in his mind—but only one was the best.

It had to do with the Luger.

“Hey,” he said, “How’s your stomach feel, Tully? Squirmy?”

“Shut up, you bastard—”

“Rolling over in there, isn’t it? Feels like it’s gonna crawl right up to the roof of your mouth.”

“Shut up, shut... up...”

“What was that, Tully? A cramp? Sometimes it’s like a tight gag traveling up and down your gullet, huh? Squeezing—”

“Joe!” Tully yelled up through the skylight. “Joe, for God’s sake!”

Then Flynn came down the stairs fast. He saw how it was with Tully, stepped aside to let him pass up the stairs.

This wasn’t the time yet. Flynn was holding the Luger and Tully wasn’t quite gone. But once he was up there, once he was hanging over the railing,

retching himself weak—

Port suddenly laughed. The sound wasn't very loud next to the Diesel but they all saw how Port laughed, and how he got up off the floor, stretching a little.

"Stop moving around!" Flynn yelled.

"Louder," said Port. "The Diesel, you know."

"I said, get back to—"

"I can hear you," said Port, and then he started to walk. He walked towards Flynn, with no rush in his movements, just walked towards Flynn and enjoying the sight of the fat man.

At first Flynn gaped, and then he went rigid, slowly, until in spite of the fat in his face the jaw muscles showed there.

The Luger had crept up with each step Port took, so that it kept pointing at the same spot all the time. Right at the belly. The muzzle trembled a little, but that wouldn't matter.

"Point blank," Flynn said, hoarse now. "I'll rip you open point blank—"

"Go ahead."

So Flynn, inches away, pulled the trigger.

It went *tick*.

And then again, *tick, tick, tick*.

"You need this," said Port, and took the Luger clip out of his pocket.

Flynn sagged when he saw it, and then he realized what had happened. No wonder Port had been so willing to drop the Luger on the floor—he'd taken the clip out! And Flynn had ejected the only shell that was left in the gun, the one in the chamber, to make sure that the gun was working right!

"All right!" Port moved fast now. He waved Flynn to the wall and he looked over at Jane, a quick smile. He nodded at Robert to get over to Flynn.

"And Powell," he said, "get in there."

Powell crawled where he was told, in the small space between Diesel and wall. It would take him minutes to get out of there.

"And Robert, if Flynn doesn't stay put just knock his shoulder. He'll faint." Port smiled reassuringly at the boy, and then bolted up the steep stairs.

He saw Tully first, but Tully was mostly in shadow, and because Port didn't think he'd have to shoot that way Tully got his shot off first.

It missed, in spite of the light on Port, because Tully hadn't taken the time to aim. He threw himself after his shot, disappeared out of Port's view for a second, and when Port was up high enough to see what had happened, he saw

Tully down on his belly and halfway into the open skylight.

Tully stayed there, with no intention of moving, because right below, right under his gun, were Joe Flynn, Robert Heering and Jane.

Port remained where he was, halfway out of the stairwell. He could save Jane, or he could save Robert, though he didn't know which it would be. He was glad that he didn't have to choose, though the thought was meaningless now.

"Go on down there where you was, Port, and throw that gun down there ahead of you! I'm counting to three..."

Perhaps he could move like a cat, or fast, like a mouse scooting down a hole.

"I'm watching for that gun, you bastard. And I said now!"

Tully was watching two places! The end of the stairs down below, and the three people by the wall! If something distracted him, if something moved...

"One!"

Not Jane, please not Jane—

"Two, you bastard!"

Robert Heering looked like he was going to be sick! His face worked, his throat worked, and his eyes were too wide open. And Port saw the sweat on his face, a sick wet shimmer.

"Three!"

Flynn screamed and fell over the girl, and the target—the best target was Robert—was no longer there. The shot rang and bounced hard in the small engine room, and not till Port was down the stairs did he see clearly what was happening.

Heering jumped right at the gun, couldn't have done it better if he had meant to jump right into the muzzle. Now he had Tully's wrist with both hands, and he was yanking and twisting the gun.

Tully lost his balance, and Robert Heering, like a beast, stepped back, waiting the second it took the man to fall; then he yanked him up by the same wrist, and pistoned his free fist into Tully's face. Before Tully collapsed he did it again, grunting with the force of his swing, and then let the man be.

Heering took a deep breath and stepped back. He saw Tully's face, saw that the jaw was broken. But it meant nothing to him, no queasiness in the stomach, no wish to go over it again, to try it differently. He was done.

He took his sister's arm and nodded at Port.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter XV

THEY GOT TO Galveston in the morning and went directly to the Heering Building. The elder Heering was not in and he was not expected. He was at Low Shelf and could not be reached. Robert Heering left word that he was going home and when his father contacted the office he should be given that message. Then he arranged for a company plane.

They had not had any sleep. Port thought that Robert Heering must be tired too, but he didn't act it. He was moving on an impetus which had not been there for years and he didn't want to stop. He talked most of the time while they flew towards Lubbock and sometimes there was true conviction and sometimes he faked it.

"He's through," said the young Heering. "I'm done with him."

"What will you do," asked Jane, "when you see him?"

For a moment Robert Heering did not know what to say. What would he do? Then suddenly he put his hands in his lap, a relaxed gesture, and he smiled. "I'll show him his lie. My mother—to show him it's finished. And then I can leave. I can go anywhere."

Jane and her brother kept talking about that, about leaving the house, about taking trips, and for a while the talk was happy and animated. It ran out after a while. Jane was too tired and Robert's wakefulness became brittle and jumpy.

"You're worried," said Port, "they'll involve you?"

"I was thinking about that," said Robert.

"Don't. The more they talk about you—which they won't—the closer they'll get to a kidnaping charge. They'll talk about the shooting to the cops, blaming it on each other."

"It's a good thing they hate each other's guts." Then Robert dropped that and in a while he kept still altogether.

They picked up Emmy Powell in Lubbock and Robert was polite with the woman, thanked her for coming along, made flat small talk that kept him away from her. After a while nobody talked. It helped that Emmy Powell was a good-natured woman and without need for approval or flattery.

When they reached the large house, the old Heering, of course, was not there.

It relieved Emmy Powell but it tightened up Robert. He called Low Shelf, he called Galveston, and when he finally learned that old Heering had gotten the message and was on his way, his state became bad.

“Let’s take a walk,” said Port. “You can’t sit still anyway, so let’s walk.”

“Let’s do. Big place here. Whole plateau planted with those crazy trees, did you know that, Port?” They walked out and Robert kept talking. “By the way, you know that place down there? Let me show you the place I mean, or did I ask you before if you knew that place down there. End of this path. Very interesting.”

Robert Heering was much too brittle. Once the hardness broke—if it should—Port wondered what would be left underneath.

As they walked up to the square house, the male nurse came around the corner, a half-smile on his face.

“His name is Swen,” said Port. “He’s a kind of male nurse.”

“Ah...” said Heering, watching the triangular muscle shape come towards the gate.

“Well, Mr. Port,” said Swen, smiling his big smile, holding his hand out. “You up at the house again? Oil business or something?” Then he nodded expectantly at Robert Heering. But Heering said nothing. His face didn’t move.

“You a colleague of Mr. Port’s?” said the male nurse. “Uh—my name’s Swen,” and he held out his hand.

Robert Heering didn’t take it. He nodded his head and said, “I’m Mr. Heering’s son. However, I’m not your patient. You may stay here, stay by the phone, because I may need you up at the house. If you’re needed, I’ll call you.”

It was so collected, and so cold, the male nurse gave no answer. He nodded, said, “Yes, sir,” and went quickly back to the square house.

Robert Heering lasted just that long. Then he started to shake.

“The effort,” he said. “The effort—”

“But you did it,” said Port. “You did it very well.”

“But the effort—not to scream at him like a maniac. It shouldn’t be that hard!”

Port took the younger man’s arm and they walked back up the path.

“You’re asking too much at one time,” said Port. “Don’t force it.”

Then they heard the car.

The young Heering stopped. He listened for the sounds which told him

that his father was getting out of the car, walking up the stone steps to the house, going inside. They heard the big door click shut.

“What did you mean,” said Port, “when you told that nurse he may be needed up at the house?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps I’ll kill him—”

“Don’t be an idiot!”

Robert Heering gave a small laugh, but it was over quickly. He turned to look at Port and held his arm.

“What’ll I say?”

“You’re leaving, Robert. Tell him you’re leaving.”

“Leaving. Why didn’t I leave? Why come back?”

“Don’t you know that the worst is over?” said Port. “You’ve gone through everything.”

“Yes.”

“Your mother will help you.”

“She?” and it sounded ugly.

“You’re here to confront him,” said Port. “And that’s why she’s here.”

The thought of that part of the meeting seemed to do Robert good. He took a deep breath and they walked to the house without saying more.

The butler opened the door and said, “Your father wishes you to join him in his workroom.”

“And where is my sister and the lady who is with her?”

“In the morning room.”

“Does my father know?”

“Miss Heering asked me not to—”

“All right. Thank you.”

The butler left but Robert Heering kept standing. He did not know which way to go first.

“See him first,” said Port. “I’ll go with you.”

When they opened the door, the old Heering stood at a window. He did not turn until he heard the door close and then he turned slowly. He waited for his son and Port to cross the large room and then he sounded almost conversational.

“Thank you, Mr. Port. I’ll take care of matters from here on.” There was silence and the old Heering waited. Then he said, “You may leave, Mr. Port.”

“He stays.”

The old Heering looked at his son. He gave a slight cough.

“Robert,” he said. “There will be a great deal of time for us to discuss—”

“Like hell!” said Robert, and when his voice cracked at the end he had to keep talking or choke on it. “There’ll be no time! You understand that? I’m leaving. I’ve come back to tell you I’m through here and I’m leaving!”

“You are through in more ways than—”

“Shut up!”

Not until then did the older Heering show any emotion. A sharp line appeared on his forehead and his eyes became jumpy.

“If you can’t muster the manners to—”

“Manners? I can’t afford manners,” Robert yelled, and the desperation squeezed his throat, his eyes, so that he had to talk with a scream and tears stood in his eyes. “I can’t afford them! It’s your manners that made you kill me off, your manners that made you kill off my mother, your manners that made you force the lie down my throat, your lies that—”

“Are you out of your mind?” and Heering was roaring. “Are you forgetting just exactly the kind of sick stock that’s been crippling you? And my efforts? My patience?”

Heering kept on like that, the witch-burning hate coming out of him, the destructiveness. His son said nothing. He stared at his father, as if mesmerized, and perhaps that’s what was happening. Port held his lip in his teeth, not knowing if Robert would come through.

“I had thought,” Heering kept on, “that helping you would be possible, that it would be possible here. An environment designed for your illness, here, close to home. But that seems too benign,” said Heering. His voice was getting hoarse. “You force me to a repulsive extreme! There are state institutions which—”

He stopped, because Port had turned and was going to the door. It was time, thought Port. Robert wouldn’t do it alone...

When Port came back through the hall with Emmy Powell, he could hear the old Heering before they got to the door. And then he heard Robert. He was cursing his father, because that was all that seemed left to him. He was still cursing when he came through the door, and only stopped when he reached Emmy Powell and grabbed her hand.

“You tell him,” he said. “You stand in front of him and tell him what I can’t say!”

“But I don’t know what you...” She let it trail, because Robert was pulling her into the room and she had to walk fast.

She seemed breathless when her son made her stop, but she tried to smile at the old Heering.

What the old Heering saw was hell. A dumpy woman who wished she could smile at him, a young man who wished only the worst—

Then he did not see them any more. He knew that his eyes were open but they could no longer focus on the pest that stood opposite him. He reached for a chair, but the pain darting through his chest stopped him. He crumbled to the floor.

A few days later, in one of the rooms, Robert Heering stood by the window and watched how the needle trees moved. His back was towards Port and his sister but he kept talking with the light monotone which for the last few days had been his manner.

“Did I ever tell you about the meeting I had with Mrs.—with my mother?” He turned and looked at Jane. “Where is she, by the way?”

“Upstairs, packing.”

“Oh.”

“What about that meeting?” Port asked.

“Oh...” and Robert Heering sounded as if he were trying to remember. Then he said, “Well, it was awkward. Very awkward.”

Port got up and walked to the door. He stopped halfway there and turned back.

“I’m sorry it was like that. I thought it might have been important.”

“Yes.” But then Robert Heering said nothing else.

“Have you decided?” asked Port. “About leaving?”

“There’s no decision to be made,” he said. “It’s out of my hands. Father’s heart attack, and what the doctor said about his recovery. I hardly think—”

“Perhaps later,” said Jane. “Later, things will be more simple.”

She looked after Port when he left and then she looked away. She felt he must be thinking the same thing as she, that the moment of a simple decision had passed.

Ace Double D-297, 1958